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"THE BEST ACCESS AND INSIGHT REMOTE WORKING CAN PRODUCE"

Welcome to the first issue of PC Gamer made entirely from the comfort of our own hastily assembled home offices. Lockdown may be sending us stir crazy, but it's yet to dull our drive to bring you the greatest games mag around.

And so, over the following pages, you'll find the best access and insight remote working can produce, from a deep dive into the seedy criminal underworld of *Empire of Sin*, to an investigation of the history of PC classic *System Shock 2*, to our Early Access verdict on the long-awaited *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*.

All the events may be cancelled, but our coverage lives on.

ROBIN VALENTINE
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Stockpiled Warhammer figures

The PC Gamer team

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Explored the strategic possibilities of kicking your enemies in the nards in *Company of Crime*.

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This month
Tried to figure out what lighthouses and queues are for in *A Monster's Expedition*.

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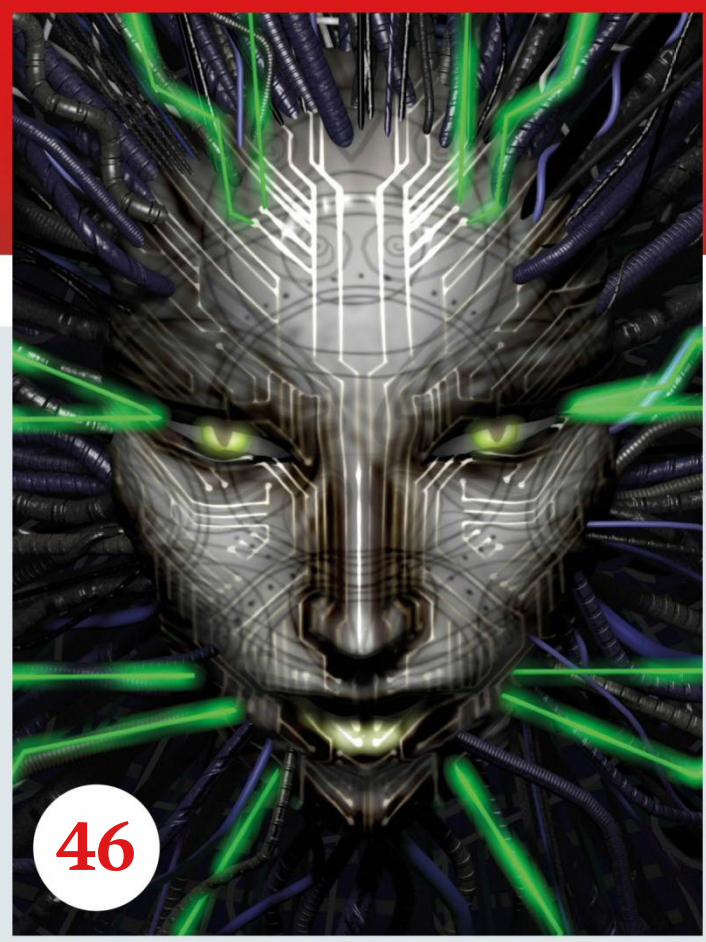

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MORE IN STORE

Epic Games becomes a multiplatform publisher

Between its world-dominating battle royale Fortnite, and its industry-shaking digital storefront, Epic Games has hardly been quiet over the last few years. But now it's adding yet another string to its bow – it's starting up its own multiplatform publishing label. And, as you might expect, it's starting with a promise to do things differently.

As a publisher, it's already planning to release games from the developers behind *The Last Guardian*, *Limbo*. and *Control*. Remedy has already worked with Epic, as *Control* is a limited exclusive on its store, but under this deal Epic's going to be responsible for a lot more than just the distribution.

According to Epic, it will be covering up to 100 per cent of development costs for the games it publishes, including salaries, QA, localisation, and marketing, but developers won't have to give up ownership of their games or creative control in the bargain. And they'll get at least a 50 percent profit split after Epic has recouped its costs.

IN EVERY OTHER WAY IT LOOKS LIKE DEVELOPERS WILL COME OUT ON TOP

Publishing agreements come in all sorts of flavours, but Epic's terms seem very generous. The promise of complete creative control for devs, along with them keeping their IP, must look rather tempting, and even more so if Epic's offering to cover all development and publishing costs. While some publishers might offer a profit split that favours developers more, in every other way it looks like developers will come out on top.

FIGHTING MAD

DARKEST DUNGEON

The Lovecraftian turn-based dungeon crawler has a new DLC – *The Butcher's Circus*. But bizarrely, it's all about competitive PvP battles. Not exactly a feature I or anyone else in the fanbase was crying out for – though it'll probably be worth buying just to hear new voice lines from the narrator... ■ ***RV***

TOOL KIT

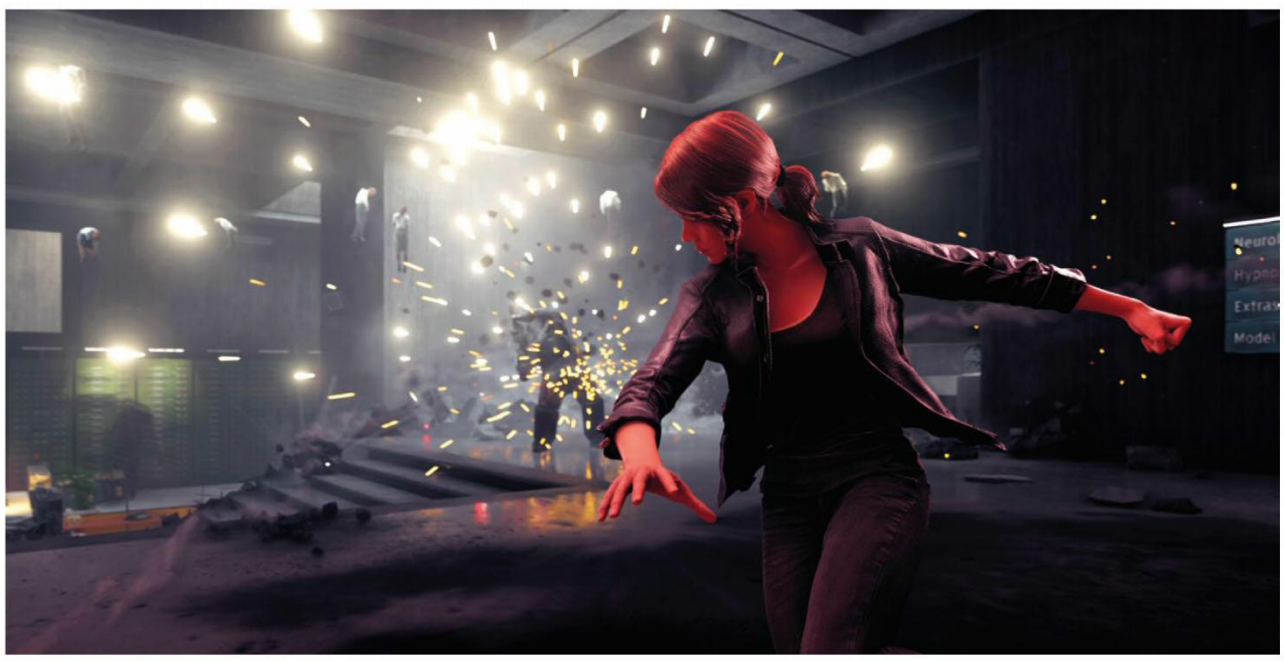
HALF-LIFE: ALYX

Now that *Half-Life: Alyx* is out, Valve has turned its attention to the level editor it promised at launch. Valve developer Jake Rodkin has confirmed that building the feature is now the team's main priority. There's no release date set, but Rodkin says there'll be "more communication soon". ■ ***RW***

CONSOLE COMMANDS

JEDI ACADEMY

Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy was recently released for the Nintendo Switch, but a bug meant veteran PC players – with their Jedi-like skills – were invading multiplayer games and slaughtering Switchers. It's a great case of accidental crossplay, which developer Aspyr has promised to fix. ■ ***AK***



ABOVE, TOP: Developers, like *Inside* and *Limbo*'s Playdead, will retain creative control.

ABOVE, BOTTOM LEFT: Team Ico and GenDesign's games haven't appeared on PC before.

Like Epic's strategy with its store, however, there's the question of sustainability. Epic's been throwing its money around to net exclusive launches and weekly free games to tempt people into installing another platform, and in April last year Sweeney predicted that investments in freebies and exclusives would exceed the store's net profits for the year, which seems to have been the case. In January, Epic announced that $680 million had been spent on the store, but when you factor in the revenue split, which nets Epic 12 per cent, and the cost of the exclusive deals, including more than $10 million for *Control*, it looks like it took a loss.

UNREAL DEAL

Since Epic recoups its costs before splitting the profit with the developer, it might not be as big a gamble as the store, but the upfront costs are going to be big. It's also going to be quite a while before it sees that recoupment, depending on how long development takes.

Starting a publishing label might not be as divisive or feather-ruffling as opening up a Steam competitor, but it still has the potential to shake things up. Epic is making a statement by boasting about its terms, putting them front and centre, and it's sure to get a reaction.

Fraser Brown

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 Remastered

It's getting the 4K treatment in an imminent remaster.

Commandos

The series is returning with a brand new game.

Minecraft

To help during the coronavirus pandemic, *Minecraft* now has free educational worlds to help kids.

Last Oasis

The launch of sandbox MMO *Last Oasis* was so rocky that the game had to shut down for a week.

Bethesda

The company won't be hosting a digital showcase to replace its E3 show, because of the pandemic.

EVE Online

A veteran *EVE* player was caught hauling nearly $5,000 worth of in-game goods by space pirates. They lost it all.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

THE SPY
The Spy is not scared of houses, just mortgages.

The Spy is a big fan of the *Resident Evil* series. The Spy's favourite was *Resident Evil 2*, which was the one where your dishwasher breaks and you're stuck handwashing a seemingly endless number of forks. "Why do I have so many forks?" you ask. "Did I really use this many forks?" you wonder. "It's only been two days since I last washed up the forks," you realise, "I haven't eaten enough meals to account for the number of soiled forks in this sink." The joke here is that *Resident Evil* is a silly name that just means "bad, in a house".

The Spy's least favourite was *Resident Evil 6*, which was the one where The Spy's neighbours did a bad job of grilling sausages. Thanks to the subsequent fire alarm, The Spy was forced to wait outside for hours in the freezing cold, wearing nothing but the matte black tactical stealth onesie that also doubles as The Spy's jimjams.

It seems unlikely that The Spy will be freed from domestic horror anytime soon, as Capcom has multiple rumoured *Resident Evil* projects in the works. After releasing the terribly successful *Resident Evil 2* and not-as-good-but-still-very-successful *Resident Evil 3* remakes, a new candidate has emerged – and fans of incremental number gains may already have figured out what it'll be. According to the VGC, who cite "multiple sources", a *Resident Evil 4* remake is planned for a 2022 release. If the report is correct, development will be handled by a team led by former PlatinumGames head Tatsuya Minami, and is being done with the blessing of *RE4*'s original director, Shinji Mikami.

It's a move that makes a lot of sense, specifically in that four comes after three. It will also likely sell very well, so there's also that. But The Spy does question whether a remake of *Resident Evil 4* is strictly necessary. It's 15 years old, sure, but it's also got a more timeless quality than its predecessors as the one that ditched the tank controls. If it is happening, The Spy hopes that its development team is given the time it needs to get it just right. *RE3*'s remake was a big dip in quality from *RE2*, and The Spy would hate to see a remake of, arguably, the series' best game given the same short shrift.

THE SPY DOES QUESTION WHETHER A REMAKE OF RESIDENT EVIL 4 IS STRICTLY NECESSARY

LEAKS TO PATCH UP

As for what's happening at the tail end of the series' chronology, *Resident Evil 8* is – according to a Twitter account called Dusk Golem – due next year. The leaker has a patchy history – correctly predicting that *Resident Evil 3* remake was coming sooner than expected, but also stating that multiple *Silent Hill* games were in development, which Konami itself seemingly shot down.

With salt then, just a pinch, Dusk Golem says that *RE8* actually began life as a spin-off called *Resident Evil Revelations 3*, but that Capcom were so impressed with an early version that they decided to make it a *Resident Evil* proper. It will, it's claimed, follow *Resident Evil 7* in being first-person, but that it will also likely upset many purists with a story that focuses on hallucinations, occultism, and other more mystical elements. Not being able to trust others is a thematic thread, which is certainly fitting when delivered by a leaker with a spotty record.

The Spy guesses we might hear more during the period of time that would usually be given to E3. At least by then The Spy might have finished washing these forks. Spy out. ■

The Spy

This month in... 2010

ISSUE
214, June 2010

ON THE COVER
Crysis 2

IN THE CINEMAS
Toy Story 3

1 "On every front, *Crysis 2* is an experiment," writes Tom Francis in his cover feature. "Can a style of game evolved to work in the jungle survive emigration to a metropolis? Is verticality a good substitute for wide open spaces? ... Can they really solve *Crysis*'s lategame linearity problems by working in more story instead of less?" Alas, Tom was right to be sceptical.

2 Alec Meer previews *XCOM*, but not the one you're thinking of. This was the one that, by way of much development turmoil, would become *The Bureau*.

3 "Let's reboot PC gaming," declares this issue's group feature, offering an excuse to grind some axes. Some suggestions – getting serious about retro, learning from pirates (ie, not sticking games with limited activations and other overt DRM), and opening up Steam to everyone – did happen to some extent. Others – making simpler, more modular PC hardware – did not.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Good luck getting this lad to cooperate in the recording studio.

BEAST IN SHOW

How animal sounds are made for games

Creature sounds can come from anywhere, really," says ArenaNet senior sound designer Joseph Clark. As game worlds grow in size and density, so does the diversity of sounds for their animal inhabitants, but you may not realise that their voices have a variety of origins as well.

"Friction is one of our best friends for sound design," Clark says. On one particular occasion, one of his co-workers was dragging a trash can from their office to the hall and noticed that it made a "great purring, guttural sound". That's when Clark's ears perked up and he knew it was time to grab the microphone.

Everyday sounds can often become the voices of videogame creatures with a bit of editing after the fact. Clark shared a video for one in *Guild Wars 2* that involved using an electric toothbrush on a cardboard box. After lowering the pitch and layering in a bicycle chain and other sounds, it became the spooky chittering purr of *Guild Wars 2*'s Boneskinnner.

Even ordinary animals can have their parts played by surprisingly odd objects. *Minecraft*'s animals have had a tune-up since the game's formative days, but Mojang's audio director Samuel Åberg says they were originally voiced by a kazoo, of all things.

Creative use of Foley recording – using objects to mimic other natural sounds – is immensely important as recording live animals can be challenging. For *Minecraft*'s newer mobs, Åberg says that Mojang tries to record actual animals where it is possible, but going to the source presents its own difficulties.

"To even be able to hear some of the dolphin's sounds, we had to use special equipment," Åberg says. "Underwater microphones, called hydrophones, and a 'click detector', which translates the dolphins' high-frequency clicks to audible levels."

Even for animals that don't live in the ocean, getting a microphone in front of their furry faces won't always produce needed results. "Animals as a rule of thumb are often fairly quiet and generally only vocalise if something is happening, for example when they feel threatened or during mating rituals," says *Planet Zoo*'s senior audio designer Pablo Canas on why getting live animal recordings can be so tough.

Using real animals can present ethical problems in addition to the logistical, points out Hinterland Studio's audio director Glenn Jamison. *The Long Dark*'s animals are almost always a threat to the player. Bears roar and wolves growl or howl. Getting a live animal to make the sounds you need isn't easy. "Getting a dog to growl playfully doesn't sound the same," Jamison says. "You'd

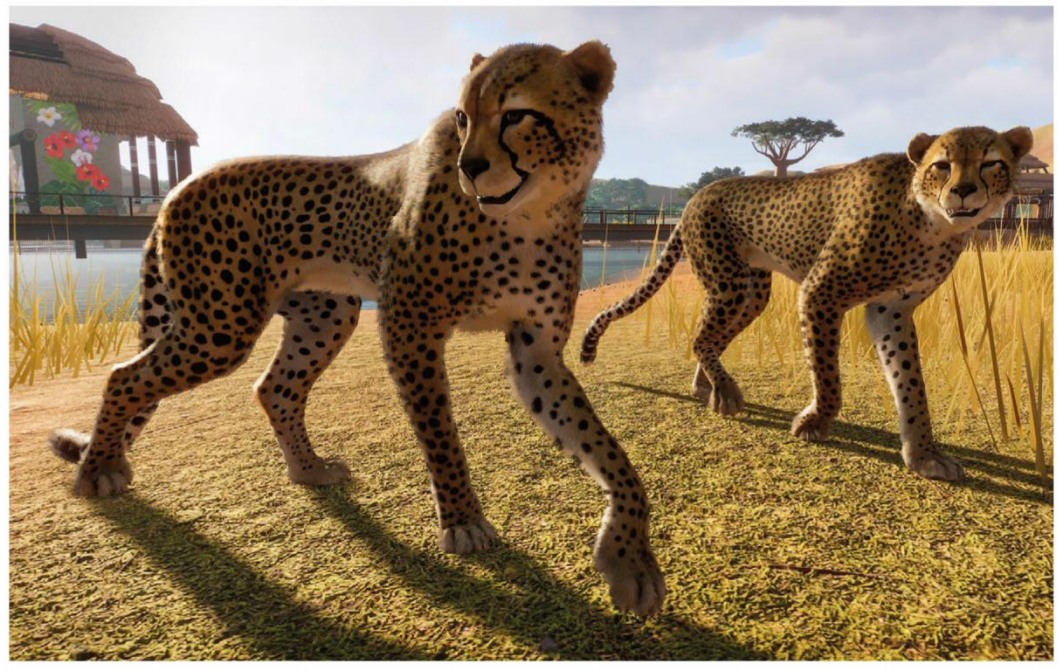
Bark life

Another trick that *Planet Zoo* employed was adding some of the quieter sounds that animals make: little grunts, breaths, and whines, even though you would never be close enough to hear them in real life. "Ironically, this makes them sound more realistic as it's what you expect to hear," says audio designer Ben Scholey.

UPPER LEFT: Try as I might I can't remember a time when cows sounded like kazoos.

LOWER LEFT: The fantastical Boneskinner's call is an otherworldly combination of sounds.

RIGHT: Cheetahs don't sound how they look, it turns out.



need that animal to actually be angry, and that's not easy to do without upsetting the animal."

"Animals are going to do what they want," agrees Clark. "I'm not gonna like, poke a bear or something." No, best not.

ANIMAL MAGIC

When kids and kazoos won't do the trick, and hauling equipment out to record an animal live just isn't feasible, sound designers often turn to libraries of sounds recorded and provided by others. "Due to the falling cost of high-end recording equipment and the advent of crowdfunding, many independent sound designers and recordists have been able to create and publish a wealth of incredible libraries," Canas says. Those libraries were particularly useful for Frontier Developments when it needed sounds for the 80 species that are in *Planet Zoo*.

Sound libraries help sound designers sidestep the challenges of going out in the field but also add an extra layer of technical difficulty. Not all recordings are created equal, of course. "The bear was probably the hardest animal to make sound believable. Library recordings are limited and there's often a lot of background noise you're dealing with," Jamison explains. *The Long Dark*'s intimidating grizzly bear needed lots of different sounds to sell its presence in the Canadian wilderness.

"What I do initially is collect everything I can, start chopping it up, and I put things into various folders with names like: angry, sad, idling, eating, roars, curious etc," Jamison says. It's a process of cutting up existing clips from libraries he had access to and grabbing just what he needed. After that, he had to lay out all the pieces of the puzzle and take stock. "I listen to each one and decide what emotion that vocalisation fits best, and I try to match that up with bear states we have in the game," he says.

Planet Zoo's animals were difficult to design in part due to the perspective of the game itself. As a management game, you have the godlike ability to observe your animal friends up close and personal. The problem is, many real recordings for those animals are taken from a distance. Bringing animals closer to a player's ear using a distantly recorded source took some expert sound editing.

"A good example of this was the orang-utan, as they have a call that they produce on top of trees known as a Long Call hoot," Canas explains. "All the recordings we found were mid-far perspective and as soon as we implemented them, they felt disconnected when experienced from a close perspective in game. To combat this, we had to use [Izotope RX] in a very surgical way to remove that distance between the mic and the orang-utan," he says of closing the distance with digital audio repairing software.

"THE BEAR WAS PROBABLY THE HARDEST ANIMAL TO MAKE SOUND BELIEVABLE"

Planet Zoo audio designer Ben Scholey said that one of the more surprising animal sounds he got to work with in *Planet Zoo* were the odd vocalisations of cheetahs. "Unlike other big cats, they are unable to roar due to the lack of a hyoid bone in their throats. It was possibly my favourite animal to work on due to their unusual calls and their lovely chirps can be heard park-wide," he says.

Creating the diverse cast of animals in every game involves more ingenuity and an array of tools than you might imagine. While it can be eye-opening to get up close and personal with dolphins and primates, not every team has the ability to get out in the field. Even if they stay home, finding the right voice for a game's creatures involves a lot of skills and a fair bit of artistry as well. ■

Lauren Morton

PUP STARS *These pooches are professional voice actors*

RIVER
This dog belonging to a former Bethesda designer voice acted and modelled Dogmeat in *Fallout 4*.

GYOZA
Halo Infinite's voice cast officially includes this funny little pug. Who is Gyoza voicing? We don't know yet!

LOUIE
The Outer Worlds' giant raptidon monsters have sounds provided by this cute little french bulldog.

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

FUNNY BUSINESS

How **SIZE FIVE GAMES** became the kings of interactive comedy

Lair of the Clockwork God is a hybrid creature, but not a fancy mythical one like a centaur or chimera. Instead it has the smug face of a point-and-click adventure, and the bouncy bottom of a platformer. You'll recognise many of the influences fondly pastiched during the course of the game: _Monkey Island_, _Sonic_, _Celeste_, and _Super Meat Boy_.

But the very best thing about it, the comedy, is a black box. Where did Ben Ward and Dan Marshall – the writers, designers and stars of *Clockwork God* – learn to be funny? Let's be honest: they didn't get it from games. They certainly didn't get it from *Borderlands*.

"It's odd, I don't really think of myself as funny," Marshall says. "I only ever just say silly things as a way of disguising my social anxiety. It's a charade, because I hate uncomfortable silence in a conversation so much that I'd rather pretend to be a confident extrovert than suffer through a single second of awkwardness. I didn't ever realise it could actually be some sort of career."

Size Five Games started not as a company, but two school friends making each other laugh. They would create comics, each drawing one panel before handing it over to the other. Ward credits Calvin and Hobbes for both the bickering and sentimentality in his games. The pair wore out VHS tapes of The Young Ones and Bottom, and Filthy Rich & Catflap – the most obscure sitcom Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson made together. Its dialogue, rude and anarchic, became a secret language for Ward and Marshall to communicate in. "It took us a while to realise that speaking in that language at length while in conversation with another person didn't make us look really cool and interesting," Ward says. "It made us look like knobs."

PCG: I think it was Tim Schafer who said that dialogue options in adventure games give you three opportunities to be funny – is that an idea that resonates with you?

1. **Ben:** It tells me that Schafer is a comedy-hog – leave some funny lines for the rest of us!
2. **Ben:** What Tim fails to realise is that it also gives you three opportunities to be unfunny.
3. **Ben:** They give us three opportunities to rip off Tim Schafer, certainly.

As the two found their own creative outlets – first in blogging and video, then in adventure games – they became increasingly conscious of the sitcom-like interplay between their two central characters, Ben and Dan. As in The Trip, the comedy series that riffs on the real-life relationship between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, Ward and Marshall built exaggerated versions of themselves.

"We wrote *Ben There, Dan That!* in sequence for the most part, so you can see it evolve through the game," Ward explains. "At first, Dan and Ben were interchangeable, then Ben became the callous adventurer and Dan would be the enthusiastic tagalong."

The comedy of conflict polarised the fictional Ben and Den, shaping them as distinct personas. But there are still traces of the writers' real friendship to be found in the games – particularly their daft cattiness and genuine fondness for one another.

"I think we're reflected in the smaller things," Ward says, "like Ben's penchant for nitpicking lore or Dan's immaculate bedroom maintenance."

SITCOM STARS

As with Mayall and Edmondson, or Coogan or Brydon, the joy of the Ben and Dan games is that you come to know the quirks and bugbears of the protagonists. When they're thrown into new situations, you look forward to seeing how they'll respond – and being surprised when their reactions don't match your expectations.

"Once you're aware of their personalities, you mostly want to write to that for consistency, but occasionally it's good to mix it up," Ward says. "You don't want Ben being unimpressed and cynical about everything, it'd get dull."

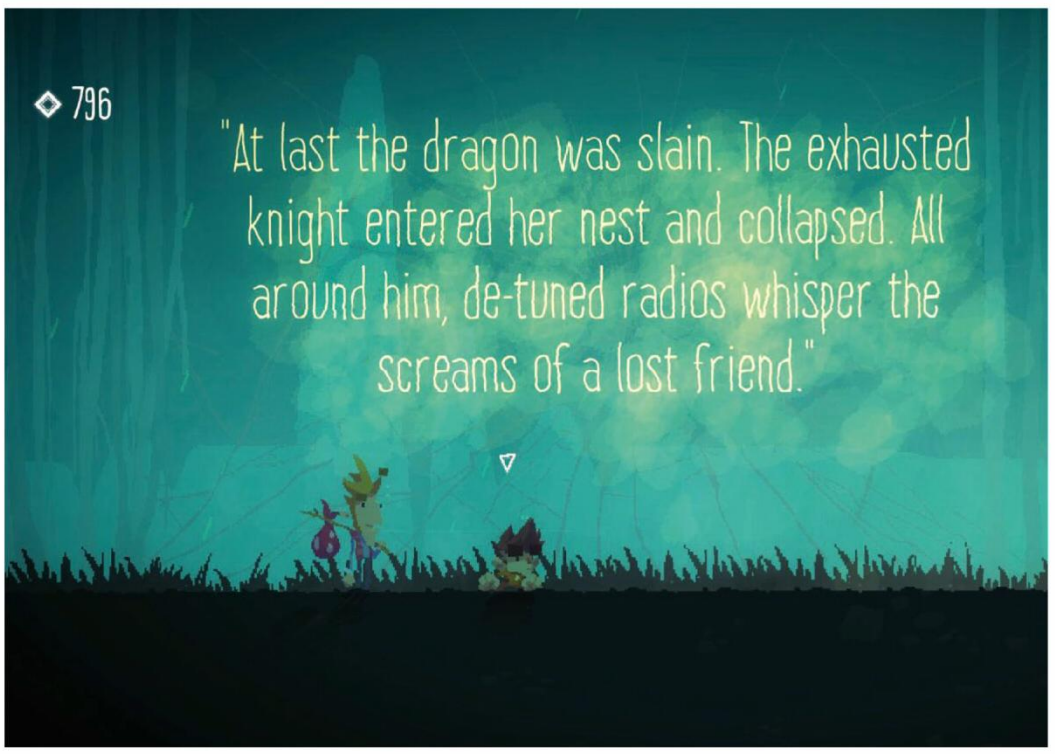
There's a reason sitcoms make such comfortable viewing: they reset. No matter how wild the events, you know that your favourite characters will return to their starting positions for the next episode. Ultimately, though, Ross and Rachel get together. In Filthy Rich & Catflap, Rik Mayall's frustrated actor finally makes it big by slandering literally every other person in showbiz, eliminating the competition. And in *Clockwork God*, Ben and Dan's journey takes them somewhere meaningful too – a sense of structure that players have appreciated.

"*Clockwork God* has too much genuine... emotion going on to dismiss it with a hand wave as 'just jokes'," Marshall says. "It's like dismissing Red Dwarf when the reality is it had some of the strongest sci-fi concepts out there."

"What we're saying is," Ward clarifies, "they should give us the Red Dwarf licence." ■

Jeremy Peel

“ONCE YOU’RE AWARE OF THEIR PERSONALITIES, YOU MOSTLY WANT TO WRITE TO THAT”



FAR LEFT: *Braid* fails to escape a good-natured ribbing in Ben and Dan’s platforming parody.

UPPER LEFT: Remarkably, LucasArts never once made this joke in the 1990s.

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RELEASE
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TaleWorlds Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
taleworlds.com

MOUNT & BLADE II: BANNERLORD

It's not finished, it's still janky, but it's brilliant all the same

Rugar, my beefy warrior in *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord*, is a lot like the game he inhabits. Rugged, clumsy, ambitious – he's great at smacking people with his huge axe, at least when he isn't falling off his horse or hitting a tree, but he really dreams of sitting on a throne and ruling the world. He might get there.

His peers similarly dream big. A long list of conniving nobles squabble over this Early Access sandbox, crisscrossing the picturesque map with their armies as they rush towards sieges, battles and other emergencies. It's a world that never rests, with borders constantly being redrawn through wars and deals between monarchs. The map wouldn't look out of place in *Total War*, but it doesn't exist exclusively to be conquered.

PLAYED IT

Bannerlord is an RPG, a life sim, a real-time tactics affair, and a strategy game all rolled into one. You're just one person, not especially noteworthy, in a world full of much more important people, and it's up to you where you go from there. You're encouraged to start swinging your sword and commanding armies at first, but you can eschew the bloody life of a mercenary for the more sedate and lucrative life of a trader, or maybe a blacksmith who uses their earnings to establish smithies in every major city, cornering the sharp object market.

While some guidance is offered through a tutorial, tips, and quests, this is still a sandbox where you're free to approach it however you like. This isn't new to *Bannerlord*, but this time the other roles feel like they're on equal footing with warfare, rather than ancillary features or an alternative to the main course. If you want to win Calradia's Best New Blacksmith trophy, you'll have just as much to do as a general does.

MIND YOUR BUSINESS

You don't have as many life and death decisions to make when you're calculating the logistics of ferrying ore from the Southern Empire to Sturgia in the north, sure, but while people are losing their heads, you can lose yourself in maths. Figuring out how many horses you'll need for the journey, how much food will be consumed and what profits you can expect to make might not be as exciting as combat, but there's still a thrill to be had in being a savvy trader.

There's no need to settle for one career, of course. I started out as a wandering mercenary, but dwindling funds made me start up a side gig in trading, and the profits from that went into a few businesses. After spending a lot of time fighting on behalf of Sturgia, I decided to swap my mercenary contract for a vassalage, formally joining the kingdom and giving me my first taste of politics. I went from hitting nameless soldiers with my axe to ruling castles and voting on kingdom-wide policies.

There's a lot to do in one lifetime, but thankfully you've got extras to spare. Characters die of old age and, if you've activated the feature, in battle, but rather than another obstacle to deal with, it actually supports the new dynastic layer. Where *Warband* was all about achieving glory for yourself, the broad objective of *Bannerlord* is to create an enduring clan, and to do that you can find yourself a spouse and start having children.

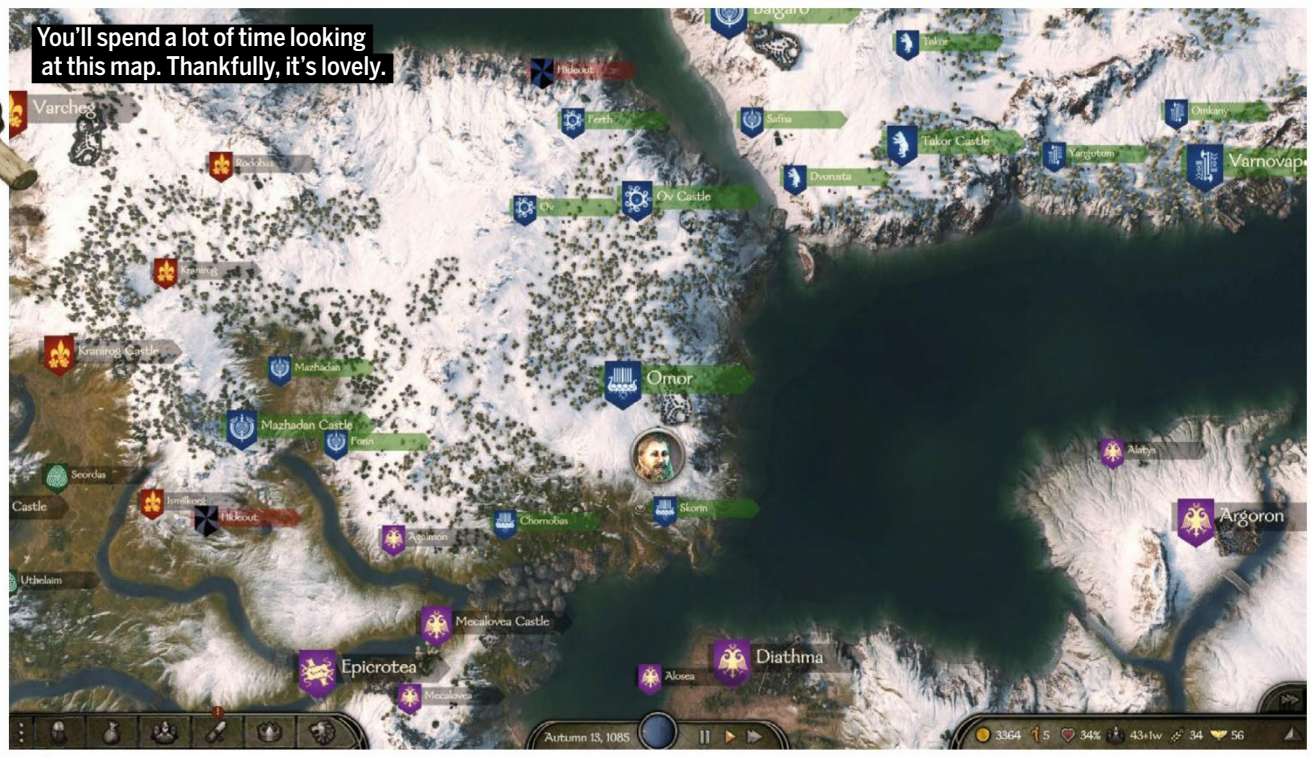
On its own, marriage feels a bit half-baked at the moment. You find someone you fancy, win a couple of formulaic interviews and then pay a dowry – congratulations, you're hitched! But it doesn't exist in a vacuum; with marriage you get a new member of your clan who can fight alongside you and your troops, »

YOU'RE ENCOURAGED TO START SWINGING YOUR SWORD AND COMMANDING ARMIES

Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord

Every siege starts with a deadly march towards the walls.

You'll spend a lot of time looking at this map. Thankfully, it's lovely.



or hang back and govern a castle. Pretty soon after shacking up, you'll start noticing little bundles of joy appearing in the clan menu, who'll then grow up to lead their own armies and possibly even rule the clan. It contributes to a deeper game, despite being quite shallow itself.

BUILD-A-BANNERLORD

Mount & Blade veterans will notice a few other new additions, but *Bannerlord* is more concerned with expanding and refining what's already there. This begins right at character creation. Like *Warband*, your character is built by answering questions about their past, but now you can immediately see the results of your choices and how they'll change your character as you select them. Rugar's parents, for instance, were a lord's companions, which meant he grew up riding and learning to fight with two-handed weapons, and he's got some extra social skills. The flavour is still all there, but the process is clearer.

After character creation, planning and practice are required to level up skills. If you want to get better with two-handed weapons, you'll need to go out there and start murdering people with them. Before that, however, you'll need to spend points when you level up to unlock your potential in that skill. It's not the most intuitive progression system, but it ends up feeling like a middle ground between the organic progression of something like *The Elder Scrolls* and the more deliberate approach taken by the majority of RPGs.

Mount & Blade's personal combat style, where you use your mouse to control the directions of your strike, isn't the revelation it was back when it first appeared. *Chivalry* and *Mordhau* both show it up, but neither of them gives players entire armies to control. And there's still a lot to master.

Most fights take place in the middle of much larger battles and sieges, which you can also hop into directly through custom battles and the four chaotic multiplayer modes. As you level up your clan by generating renown from battles and quests, you'll be able to recruit more and more troops, as well as randomly-generated companions with backstories, a few personality traits, and the ability to lead their own armies or govern your fiefs. Even before your clan reaches higher tiers, you can get involved in the titanic clashes by joining the army of another lord, with hundreds and sometimes thousands of warriors hacking away at each other.

Politics can be as absorbing as battles and sieges.

MOST FIGHTS TAKE PLACE IN THE MIDDLE OF MUCH LARGER BATTLES AND SIEGES

POINT AND CLICK

This is when the series' familiar jankiness is really on display, as the AI tries to make sense of the bewildering mess. During these battles, you've got to look out for yourself as well as your troops. If you want, you can just tell all of them to get stuck in and then join them, or you can diligently assign the various groups under your command specific orders, taking advantage of the terrain, protecting vulnerable flanks and tempting enemy armies into traps. Your troops ain't too bright, but you've got a great deal of control over your army, with just as many options at your disposal as you do in most pure strategy games.

I can't get enough of the sieges. Charging up to walls as arrows and stones rain down from above, climbing up ladders and siege towers as men topple off them, desperately trying to push through the throng of soldiers so you can actually hit something with your axe. They're confusing and frantic and sometimes you just get stuck in the mosh pit the whole time, but they're sieges – what else should they be? Nothing else in *Mount & Blade* offers a greater sense of just being one person in a bloody meat grinder.

The excitement of these sprawling brawls is somewhat undermined by performance issues and bugs, two of the most notable reminders that *Bannerlord* is still around a year away from a full launch. Aside from the dodgy pathfinding and a few freezes, my time with the game wasn't too rocky, but I did struggle a lot with larger sieges.

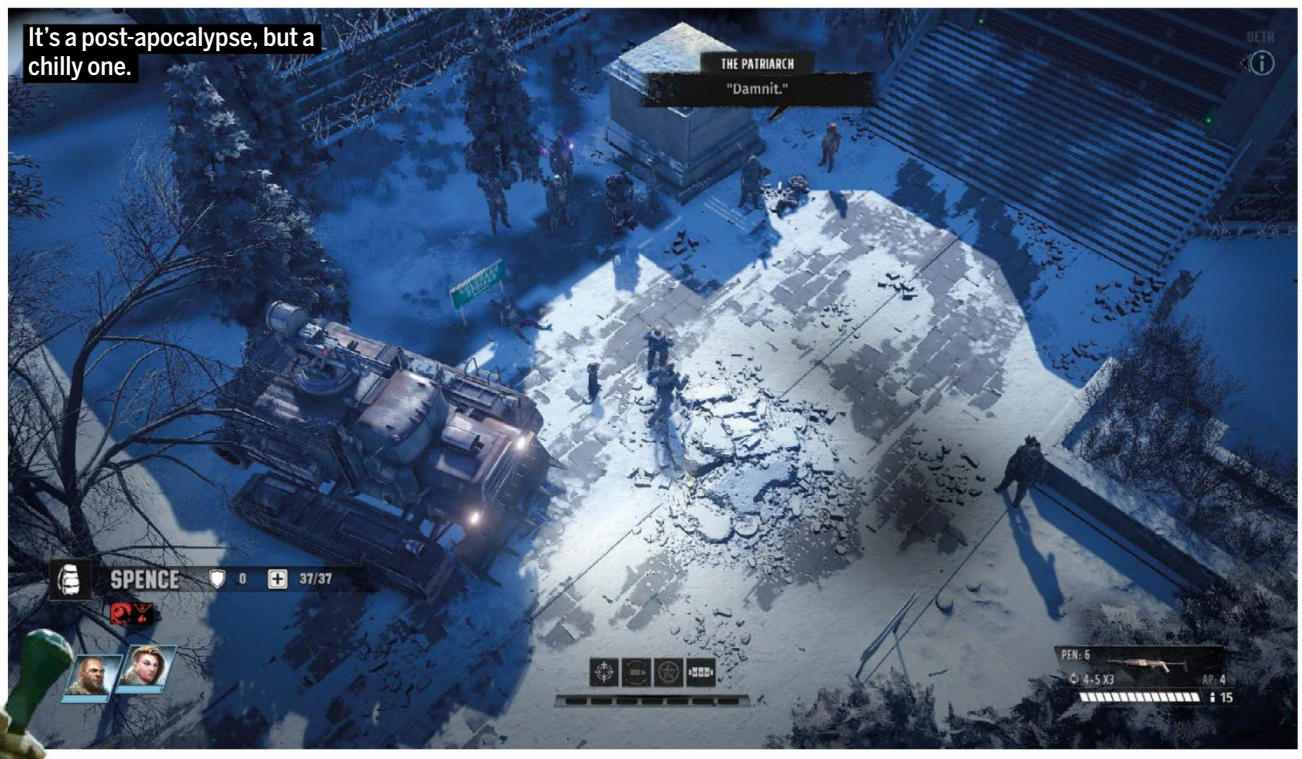
Those issues aside, *Bannerlord* doesn't feel much like an Early Access game. This isn't because it feels finished, which it absolutely doesn't, but because there's already so much for you to lose yourself in. Even after a week of exploring Calradia, there are plenty of avenues I've barely ventured down, and this is just the start. Mods are already appearing, and we've got around a year of updates ahead of us. There's no harm in waiting for it to leave Early Access, but *Bannerlord* is already a capable sandbox, primed to spit out all sorts of stories and infinite battles.

Fraser Brown

Wasteland 3

The turn-based battles are a little simple, at least at first.

It's a post-apocalypse, but a chilly one.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
August 28	inXile Entertainment	In-house	inxile-entertainment.com

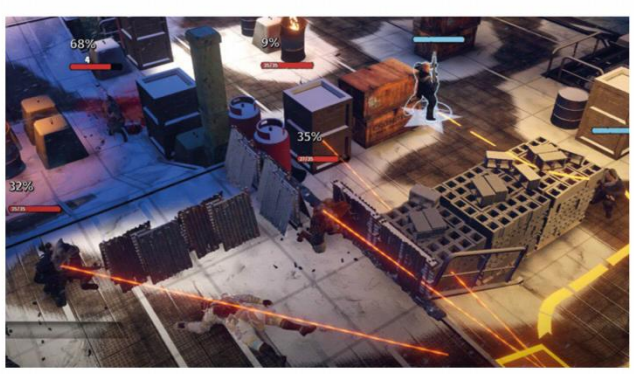
WASTELAND 3

Dark humour and ultraviolence in a cruel, cold world

On top of the dam I've just taken from a bunch of ruthless gangers, a Ranger Major dies horribly. As the game describes it, her intestines fall out just before she expires. Grim. Metres away I recruit a cat wearing a fedora to my team. Events can go from dark to light very quickly in *Wasteland 3*.

This latest RPG in the series is set in deepest, darkest Colorado Springs, a place where gang members string up their victims and paste threatening, bloody messages onto any spare wall they can find. You take care of these villains in turn-based combat reminiscent of *XCOM*, but with a gritty, survivalist feel. You bolt mods onto guns between combat encounters, and take down your foes with found weapons scrounged from the wasteland.

You start by picking a pair of Rangers. You can pick a couple of young idealistic lovers, grizzled mercenary veterans, and more. I really hoped that this would make some difference in the game itself, beyond the choice of character models, but your heroes' dialogue is generic. The conversation options you have don't seem to reflect the characters you've chosen at the start of the game. Instead the setting is defined by the survivors you meet as you fight through wintry ruins. One is that Ranger who lost her guts, another is a warrior with a giant hammer known as 'The Patriarch'. He bludgeons a gang member to death during our first chat. *Wasteland 3*'s world is brutal.



It's certainly not shy with blood and gore.

I LOVE THAT YOU HAVE A STAT CALLED 'SNEAKY SHIT' THAT LETS YOU TRICK ENEMIES

MASTER AND COMMANDER

It's a slick turn-based tactics game though, and I'm particularly encouraged by the fact you secure a base in the first few hours. There's clearly a focus on recruiting new Rangers and building the old ruin into a formidable fortress. The place is occupied by guard robots, but once dispatched you hack the giant central computer column and program the system to recognise you as 'commander'. I look forward to building that base up in the finished game, to bring the Rangers back to full force.

Combat is basic to begin with, however. You only have a couple of characters with simple assault rifles. Enemies sensibly take cover and you roll dice at one another as you exchange fire. I met one knife-wielding maniac determined to take me down in close combat, but he could never survive three turns out of cover as he ran exposed without armour toward my machine-guns.

There are stompy giant spider robots, which you're taught to avoid early on, which hints at more interesting combat encounters deeper into the game. There's a stealth element to navigating the landscape as you negotiate enemies' red-shaded vision range. You get bonuses for ambushing enemies, but you can also avoid them completely. There's a dark sense of humour at play here too. I love that you have a stat called 'Sneaky Shit' that lets you trick enemies in conversation. Even the descriptions of your wounds are flavourful. One of my starting team members suffered internal bleeding, "There's something going on in there, and it ain't good" reads the description as I mouse over.

PLAYED IT

I enjoy the gallows humour, and the frozen apocalyptic landscapes, and the cat wearing a hat. The cat doesn't do anything at all, but it's nice to have a mascot in a world of crazed malcontents trying to survive the wasteland. I'd like to see some more variety and character in your main squad, but that might come as you level them up and develop their stats. It's clearly a well made isometric RPG, though, and is definitely a refreshing change of tone if you've been mainlining *Pillars of Eternity* and *Divinity: Original Sin 2* for the past year or so.

Tom Senior

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn

DEVELOPER
Realmforge Studios

PUBLISHER
Kalypso Media

LINK
kalypsomedia.com

SPACEBASE STARTOPIA

NEW INFO

To boldly go where Mucky Foot has gone before

It would be difficult to overstate my nostalgia for the original *Startopia*. An irreverent space-base sim created by a team of ex-Bullfrog devs, its mash-up of business management, strategy combat, and terraforming made it a unique classic.

This spiritual sequel, coming from a totally different studio, has big boots to fill, then.

My hands-off demo reveals that it is, at least, extremely faithful. Almost all the familiar elements are present: the 2001-aping donut-shaped station, unlocked a section at a time; the three layers of decks, including a hugely customisable wildlife area; various alien species, each with their own unique preferences and job roles.

But with that comes perhaps a bit too much old-fashioned sim design. There's an uncomfortable focus on mechanics over narrative logic which leaves it all feeling a bit detached, and plenty of fiddly busywork, especially in the awkward combat sections.

More damningly, its attempts at comedy fall pretty flat. The original was defined by its Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy-esque sense of humour, and while *Spacebase* has a few endearing moments (I couldn't help but smile when I discovered you can build alien cat cafés), it struggles to capture its predecessor's charm.

Robin Valentine

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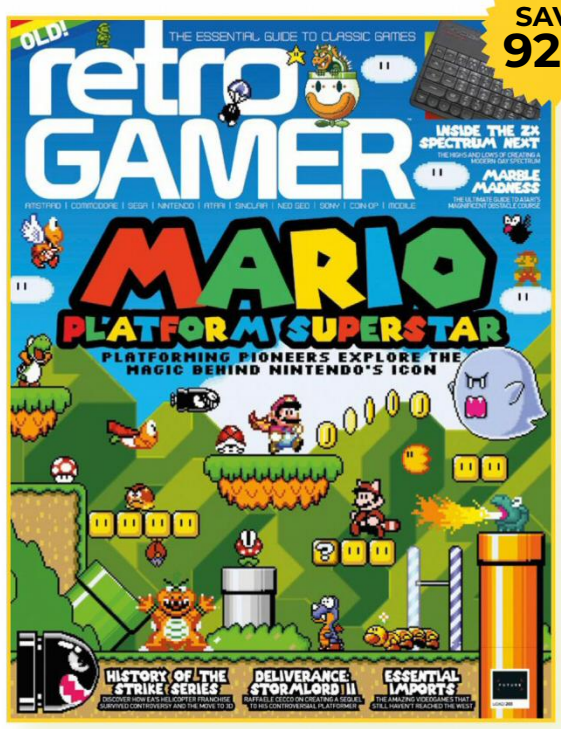

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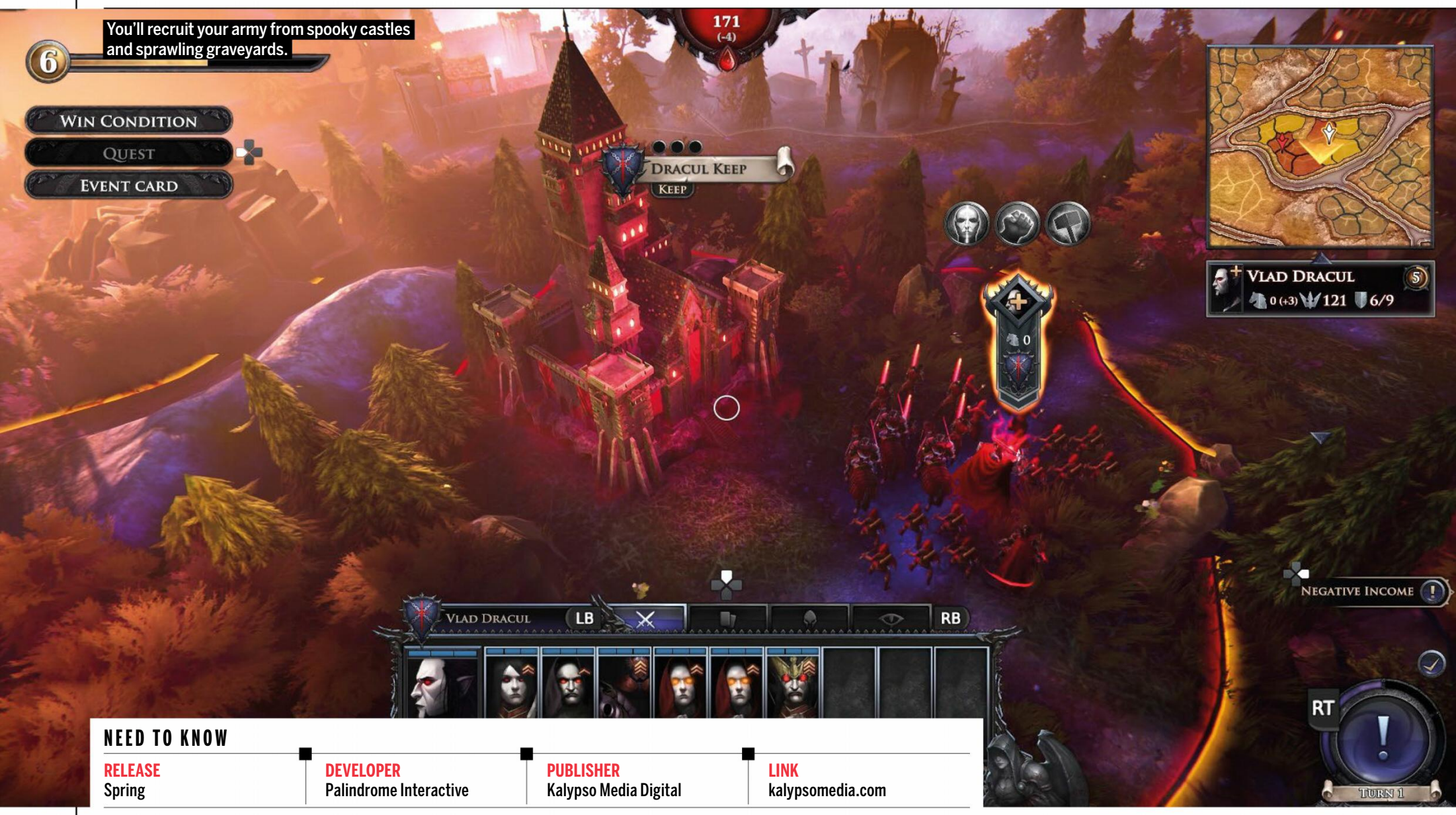
Immortal Realms: Vampire Wars



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring

DEVELOPER
Palindrome Interactive

PUBLISHER
Kalypso Media Digital

LINK
kalypsomedia.com

IMMORTAL REALMS: VAMPIRE WARS

Supernatural strategy and turn-based bloodsucking

Despite bearing the kind of name that calls to mind free-to-play browser games, a developer demo reveals this unusual strategy title ticks all sorts of PC Gamer boxes. Turn-based combat? Check. A map-conquering meta-layer reminiscent of the Total War series? Check. Hell, it's even got cards.

NEW INFO

Well, sort of. The developer is keen to stress the game doesn't feature deck-building or anything like that. Your hand of cards is simply an easy UI shorthand for your leader's powers and abilities, both in-battle attacks and buffs, and out of battle boosts to things like recruitment and resources. It's an elegant solution, reducing some of the visual fiddliness strategy games can fall victim to.

In a set-up reminiscent of the *Heroes of Might & Magic* or *King's Bounty* games, you control not only settlements, but heroes who travel the map, levelling up and gaining in power. Different territories allow you to recruit different units into their army as they pass through them.

BLOOD WORK

But this is a world, not of wizards and orcs, but of warring vampire clans. Instead of griffons, mages, and knights, you're recruiting bat swarms, gargoyles, and... well, knights, but very pale knights with fangs. It's not exactly 100 per cent original – the clans map very obviously onto existing vampire fantasy archetypes, being Dracula-like elegant vampires, Nosferatu-esque freaks and spellcasting seductresses. But in a genre too often mired in samey settings, it's a surprisingly refreshing twist.

An early tutorial mission sees you playing a warrior countess leading her bloodsucking compatriots in crushing a revolt of human peasants sick of having their necks bitten. The lead characters are fun, theatrical villains, and there's a pleasing grimdarkness to your abilities being things like bathing in blood, or summoning tornados of the stuff to blast back your enemies.

THIS IS A WORLD, NOT OF WIZARDS AND ORCS, BUT OF WARRING VAMPIRES

While the moment-to-moment action mostly consists of tiny men hitting each other, much of that gleeful nastiness is brought to life through evocative artwork. The cards themselves are especially fun – each has its own gently looping 2D animation depicting some gothic scene, from leering gargoyles crouching on castle ramparts to blood being drained messily into buckets for later use.

Immortal Realms: Vampire Wars makes for an ambitious offering, especially as the studio's debut project. Combining an unusual setting with RPG mechanics and at least two different styles of strategy, it may be biting off more than it can chew. But I'm intrigued by what I've seen so far, and I'm already keen to lead my own army of the night.

Robin Valentine

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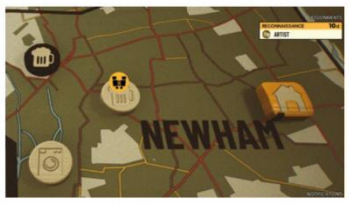
Company of Crime



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Summer	Resistance Games	Ranieri Gaming	resistancegames.com

COMPANY OF CRIME

Violent strategy on the streets of swingin' London

Yes, it's another *XCOM*-inspired squad-based strategy game, but *Company of Crime* sets itself apart with its focus on melee combat. Set in London in the 1960s, where guns weren't readily available, you'll punch, kick, and headbutt your way through the underworld as a crook or a copper – either building a criminal empire, or bringing one down.

There *are* guns in *Company of Crime*, but using them comes with a heavy price. As you commit a crime – roughing up the owner of a pub, say, or robbing a jewellery store – a so-called heat meter will rise, eventually resulting in the police showing up and making your life much more difficult. Throwing a few punches will only tickle your heat level, but pull out a gun (this is Britain, remember) and the law will respond accordingly.

FIRST LOOK

Instead you can incapacitate enemies by poking them in the eyes, kicking them in the nuts and throwing them around like a sack of potatoes. This is a strategy game less about cover and flanking, and more about using special abilities to reposition enemies. Kick someone in the stomach and they'll be knocked back, creating some space between you and them. If they're near a wall, grab them and smash them into it for extra damage. You can even draw aggro by hurling insults.

Company of Crime has a class system, which adds further depth to the combat. Bouncers are, as you might expect, the muscle, with a special talent for tossing enemies around the map. Torturers can pile on status effects, stunning, angering or injuring anyone who crosses their path. You can recruit these goons, and others, from pubs. If they die you can hire more, but as in *XCOM*, units who survive multiple jobs will grow stronger.

IF THEY'RE NEAR A WALL, GRAB THEM AND SMASH THEM INTO IT FOR EXTRA DAMAGE

If the cops do show up and you're forced to make a hasty getaway, there's a chance you'll leave evidence behind – a wallet with your ID in it, perhaps. This will make your heat level rise, which you can prevent by embarking on a risky mission that sees you returning to the scene of the crime. This is part of the game's larger strategic layer, which involves conquering territory, managing your reputation, and ultimately becoming the most feared criminal organisation in London.

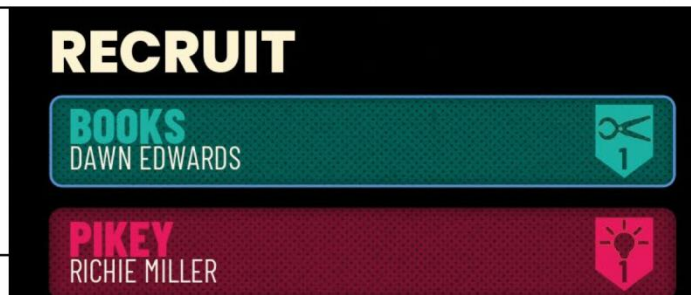
PIG OUT

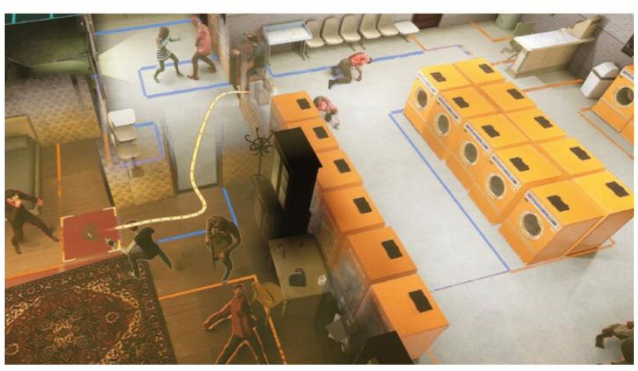
But if you'd rather play as the fuzz, *Company of Crime* has a whole separate police campaign. While criminal missions are about planning, pre-meditation, and getting in and out without a fuss, as a cop you're much more reactive. You'll start a mission with a crime already in progress, and must find a way to arrest the people involved before they escape. You also have to take civilians into account, as harming an innocent pub patron will get you into trouble.

As for the grander strategy elements of the police campaign, you'll put sergeants on patrol in crime-ridden districts to sniff out trouble, lean on informants to reveal gang hideouts, gather evidence from crimes after the fact, and arrange stakeouts. As the criminals you're trying to build fear and respect, taking over territory; as the cops your goal is increasing your presence on the streets to make them safer, and squeezing the gangs so hard they can no longer operate effectively.

Company of Crime is a really interesting take on the turn-based strategy genre, and I love the idea of a game set in 1960s London, with its fashion, music and atmosphere. I just hope the game sticks to its guns by, er, not sticking to guns, and staying true to the reality of the setting. The melee focus is one of the most interesting things about this for me, and I'd hate to see the late-game turn into a cockney *XCOM*.

Andy Kelly





Fighting dirty is allowed. And encouraged.

£600

BOOKS
DAWN EDWARDS

STATS

HEALTH	4
STAMINA	45
INTIMIDATION	55
AIM	67
MOVEMENT POINTS	5

Cold blooded **TORTURER**

SKILLS

1 NEWCOMER
2 ROAD TESTED
3 DURABLE
4 WORTHY
5 BADASS
6 RESPECTED
7 HARD-AS-NAILS
8 EL JEFE

COSTS

MONEY 100£

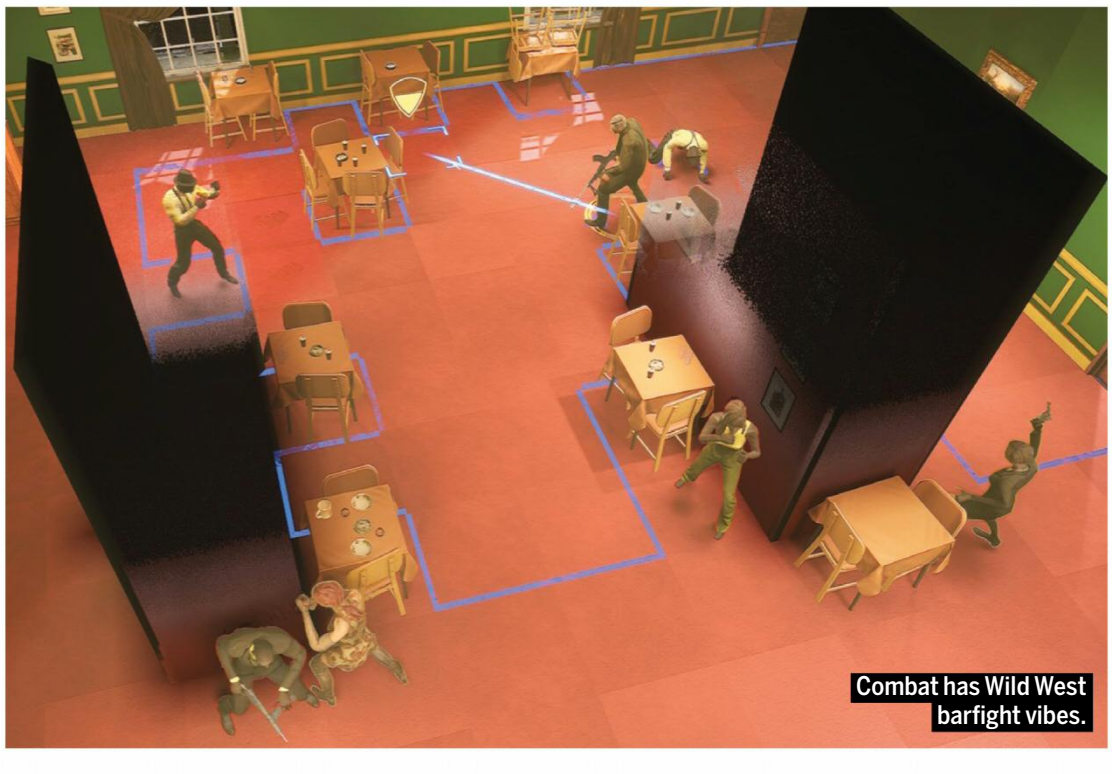
RECRUIT (3/4)

TORTURER

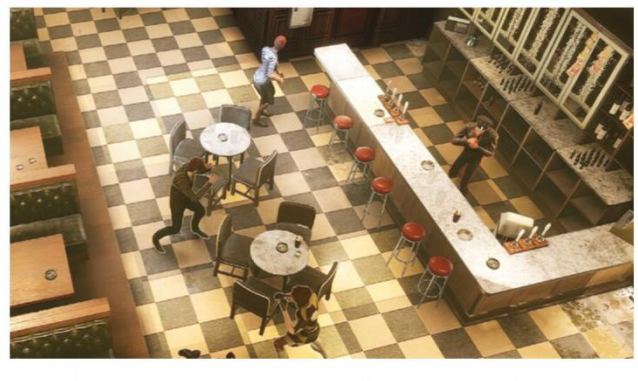
Torturer is expert on causing different status effects on enemies. Eyes, knees and bollocks are rarely safe when a torturer is around.

MAP HQ CREW LOCATIONS

Torturers love kicking people in the bollocks.



Combat has Wild West barfight vibes.



The 1960s setting is rich with atmosphere.

A Monster's Expedition

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2020	Draknek and Friends	Draknek	monsterexpedition.com

A MONSTER'S EXPEDITION

Looking at humanity's quirks through very different eyes

Imagine if other lifeforms examined the human race. They'd be pretty stumped by the way we do things. Bundle these observations together and you'd get *A Monster's Expedition*, an adventure that shows us what humanity seems like from the perspective of curious monsters.

In *A Monster's Expedition (Through Human Exhibitions)* you play as a faceless monster sporting a cute backpack who traverses groups of archipelagoes. Figuring out how to cross the water to get to each island is the core of the puzzle-solving, and involves pushing objects around the small space. Each individual island has several different exits, and solving a puzzle in different ways leaves you free to explore and wander the rest of the game's world.

The little dude you play as has a lot of similarities to humans: two arms, two legs, a fondness for adorable rucksacks. But *A Monster's Expedition* makes it comically obvious that we are indeed very different. These islands are not just brain teasers, they double as an exhibition for monsters who want to learn about the strange habits and behaviours of humans. The islands are sprinkled with plinths which display a variety of human artefacts complete with descriptions musing about what the objects are.

These little observations about human culture are brilliantly wholesome – like a description for a queue sign speculating that the reason why humans from 'Englandland' love to queue so much is related to why they love talking about the weather, and how lighthouses are actually the lure of a giant anglerfish preying on passing ships. Reading these descriptions is a short relief from puzzle-solving, and adds to the all-pervading charm.

LIGHTHOUSES ARE ACTUALLY THE LURE OF A GIANT ANGLERFISH

Bouncing from one island to the next means solving block-pushing puzzles. There are a number of trees on each island that can be pushed over and used as logs, that can be used to bridge together two islands. If you push a log sideways it will keep rolling until it hits something, meaning that many of your logs might accidentally roll into the ocean if you're not careful. Pushing a log lengthwise will let you flip it one tile at a time, making it stand upright or lie down. These puzzles are all about moving your log in the right direction so when you give it that final push, it rolls into the right place.

Different islands mix this structure with different types of trees and new techniques as you move throughout the many biomes of the world. If you get stuck on a particular set of puzzles, you can just go down a different pathway to a whole other set of puzzles, returning when you want to have another crack. There are a number of teleportation post boxes around the islands, so you can zip from one area to another with ease, which helps soften the backtracking.

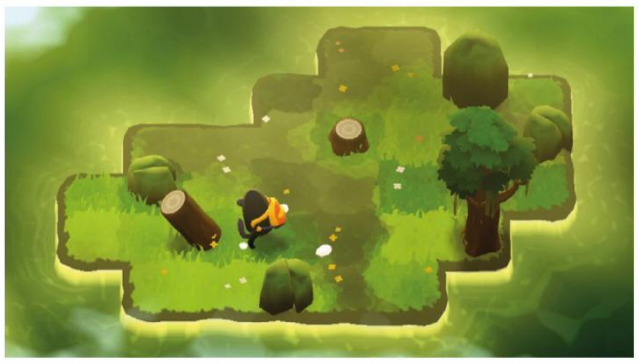
PLAYED IT

CAPTAIN'S LOG

A Monster's Expedition has a breezy approach when it comes to its puzzles. It has a calming atmosphere that will cool any hot-headedness when you get stuck. The gentle plucking of guitar strings matches your movements, and the little jingle when you complete a puzzle is lovely. There's a button that undoes your previous move and a button that resets the islands, reversing your mistakes as quickly and gently as possible.

A Monster's Expedition takes you on a lovely jaunt through an off-kilter world. I discovered that if I found a puzzle particularly tricky, the best solution would be to go away and return later, relaxed and refreshed – suddenly it would all click into place. It's a warm and cosy puzzle game with brain-teasers that will soothe your synapses rather than fry them.

Rachel Watts



It's good to have a little sit down once in a while.

Disclaimer: Former PC Gamer deputy editor Philippa Warr is a writer for *A Monster's Expedition*.

The colour palette change as you visit different biomes.

Us humans and our weird red ropes.

STANCHION AND ROPES

This is another human museum magic trick: If you put little metal poles around an exhibit visitors will still get too close and prod it BUT, if you connect the poles using red ropes, an invisible wall pops up and the exhibits are safe!

Just a Kraken, casual.

Iron Harvest

The mechs are charmingly top-heavy and lumbering.

Infantry can feel a little useless at times.

Between a mech and a hard place.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
September 1	King Art Games	Deep Silver	kingart-games.com

IRON HARVEST

In a war between men and mechs, who will win? Mechs, obviously

What's better than a massive tank? A massive tank with legs. *Iron Harvest* is a real-time strategy game set in an alternative vision of the 1920s that sees massive tin can mechs march into war alongside squads of desperate soldiers. It looks gorgeous, and it plays like a love letter to *Company of Heroes* – Relic's splendid World War II RTS.

Each battlefield is packed with objectives to secure. If you capture more mines than your opponent, you can push the devastating mechs out sooner and earn a clear advantage. In a standard skirmish you win by keeping hold of victory objectives – though it's difficult to see where they are. There are so many points to capture that the minimap – and the game overall – is somewhat tricky to parse. It looks spectacular though. I love to see dozens of troops exchanging fire as mortar blasts rain down around them.

It's early days – *Iron Harvest* is in alpha – so teething problems are inevitable. The beautifully animated mechs often struggle to navigate the battlefield. As I order them to attack the enemy base the large ones take a convoluted route through the western side of the map, trudging slowly through the city with nothing to kill. The enemy's walking tanks fail to spot my infantry unit squatting on a point, even though my troops are only metres away. And then there's the time that another one of those cool walking tanks stands happily a few metres in front of my heavy anti-mech gun, absorbing shots to the chest every 30 seconds until it explodes...

The current build is a little rough around the edges.

THE RANGE OF TROOP TYPES AND MECHS IS EXCITING, AND THEY LOOK BRILLIANT

BLOOD AND IRON

The skirmish AI is a mess at the moment, but I have hope. The setting is excellent. You're battling in rural factory settings – rusty iron structures embedded in swaying wheat fields. The range of troop types and mechs is exciting, and they look brilliant. I like to churn out anti-infantry mechs with dual machine-guns. They plod shakily to the front line and then open fire to devastating effect. The similarly-sized sniper mechs are great too, though they have limited application. They're deadly to other small mechs, but there's only a five to ten minute period before those are supplanted by massive bastards that crush all opposition. My favourite one is a walking castle with a mortar on top, which also serves as a handy troop transport.

And what about the poor infantry? Well, they're screwed, but you need them to capture points in the second half of a match while the mechs do the real fighting. *Iron Harvest* tries to create a similar balance between men and machines that *Company of Heroes* does so well, but the mechs are easy to produce and the infantry struggle to stay relevant towards the end of a skirmish. I often send them in to desperately grab a point as they're mown down by a monstrous crab tank that they can't dent. There are weapons scattered around the map that give infantry units a one-in-a-million chance of taking a mech down, but most footsoldiers are doomed.

PLAYED IT

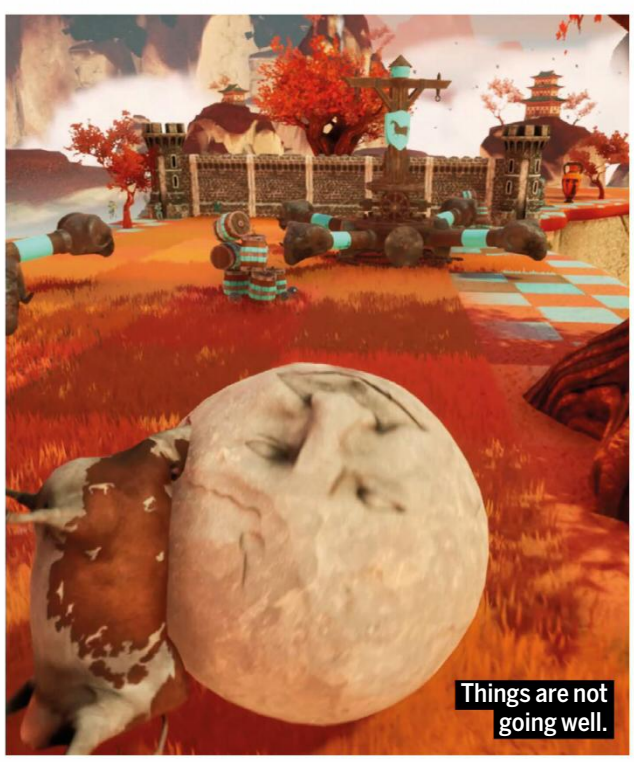
These are balancing matters, though, and that's the benefit of an alpha test like this. The developers can gather data, tweak resource values, adjust AI pathfinding, and work on making each unit feel special and purposeful. Eventually there'll be a full single player campaign, and the alpha already features an entertaining (if easy) horde mission that throws troops at you from all directions as you try to secure points between waves.

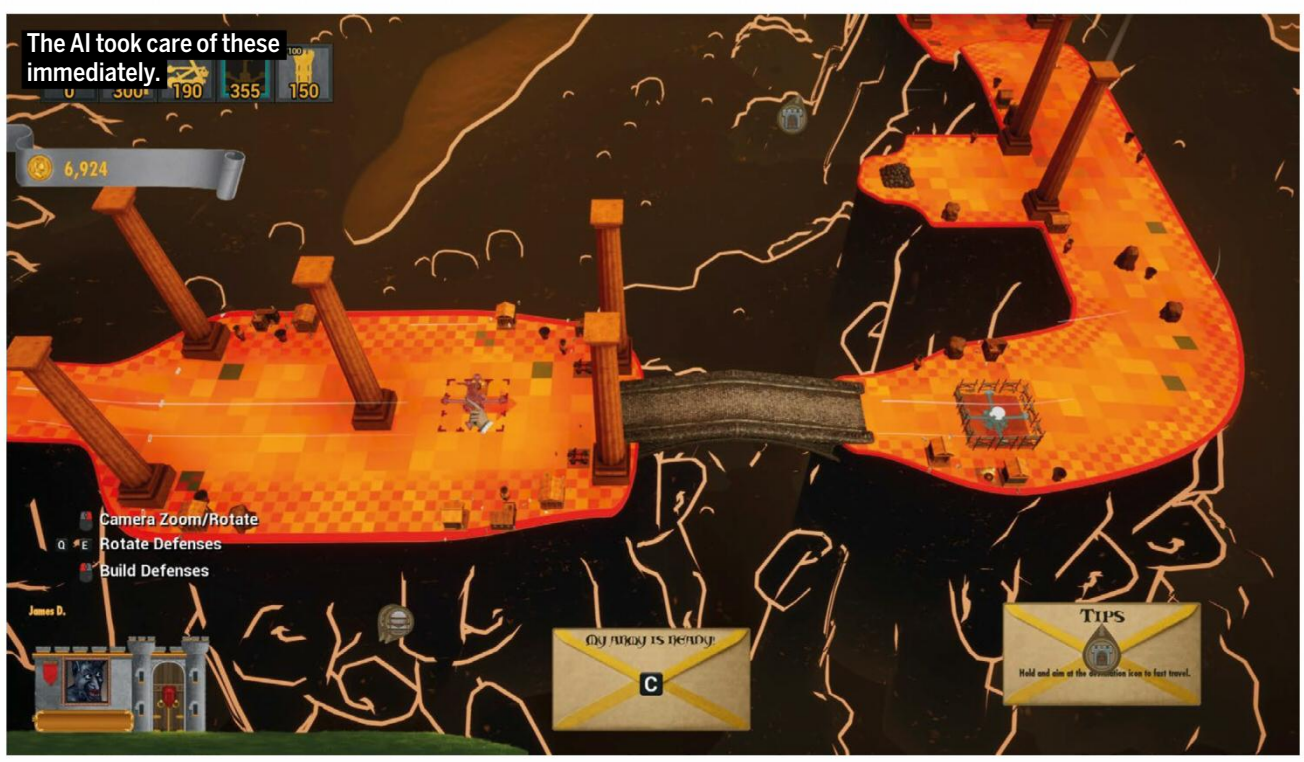
Iron Harvest invites comparisons to *Company of Heroes*, but that's a high bar to clear. I'm just delighted to see devs pick up the baton and try to enhance that squad-based RTS formula with an innovative new premise.

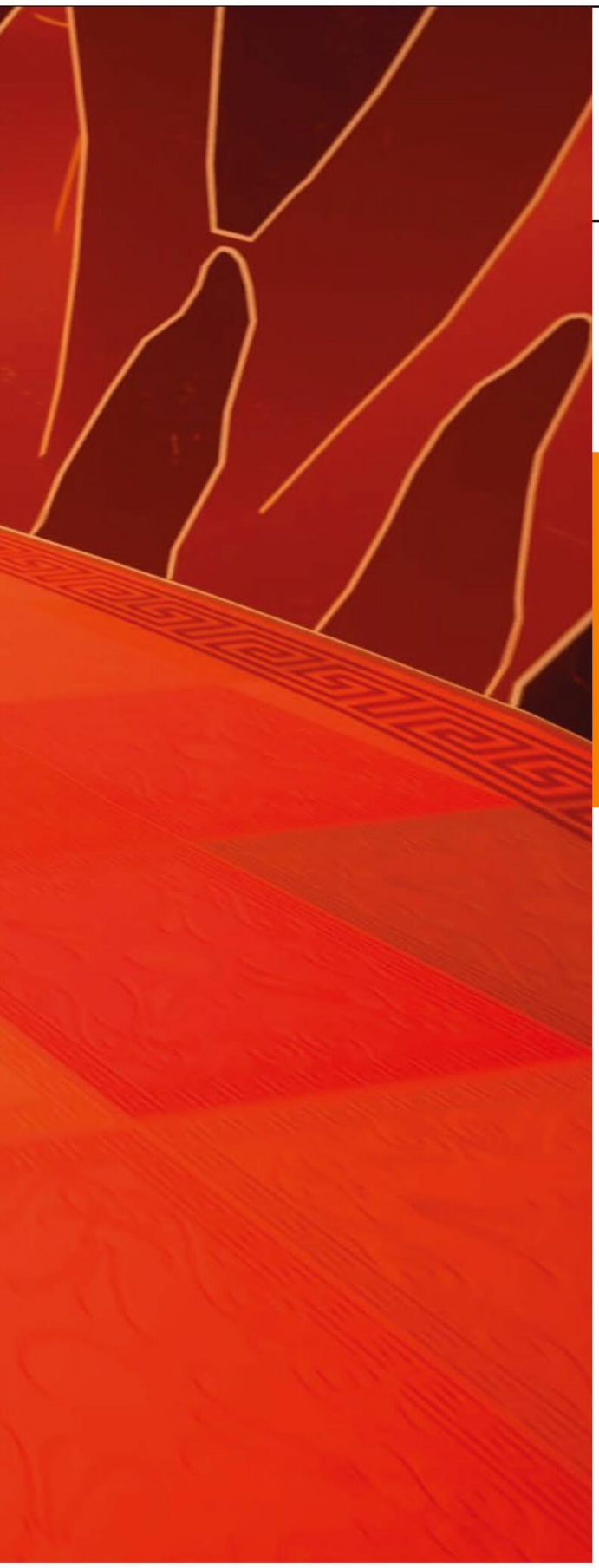
Tom Senior

Rock of Ages 3: Make & Break

Not a katamari, I'm afraid.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
June 2	ACE Team	Modus Games	modusgames.com

ROCK OF AGES 3: MAKE & BREAK

Stop-start gameplay leads to some serious marble sadness

I'm not sure I understand *Rock of Ages 3: Make & Break,* on a fundamental level. It exudes playfulness and joy from every pore as a game about crashing a boulder through paper doll dioramas should. But it stamps out that energy with some incredibly frustrating course design and confusing creative tools.

It's an excellent pitch, on paper at least. Little scenes from myth and history run through by a massive rock with a dumb grin or, if you're gambler, a wheel of cheese precariously balanced on its rim for maximum velocity – dumb grin also included. *Rock of Ages 3* turns these boulder runs into time trials, races, elaborate games of skee-ball, obstacle courses, and castle sieges. It just doesn't embrace the basic joy of being a huge, tumbling mass of rock (or cheese) in doing so.

The thrill of reaching terminal velocity while bashing through crowds of paper peasants and castles and flying through the air like some impossible blimp is constantly cut down by tight corners, innumerable traps, and boulder opponents getting in the way. The tension between gaining speed and grinding to a halt should err on the side of the boulder rather than encourage tip-toeing between catapults and towers and adhesive cows.

I played a game of skee-ball, the most pointlessly bloated game of skee-ball in my life, where I careened down narrow slopes, stopping to avoid crashing into unbreakable buildings, slowing to a dull roll to make tight corners, helplessly flying off the course because my opponent knocked me away – all to hit a final runway leading to a ramp below a skee-ball target. Nearly two minutes in: four points. And then I'm teleported to the start. It's novel, but a disjointed game mode.

It's difficult to zoom out far enough to see the entire track in Make mode.

THE TRUE JOY OF ROCK OF AGES IS SOMETHING BEYOND MY UNDERSTANDING

BOULDER DASH

War games let you collect gold and set traps and obstacles along your opponent's course while they do the same to you, but units are frustrating to place and to face. My AI opponents would occasionally let a single catapult halt their momentum completely, while blowing through massive blockades of towers and springboards. And on my end, manoeuvring around those traps was just an increasingly frustrating and clumsy physics gauntlet. Once one player gets out ahead, it's pretty difficult to reverse the momentum anyway.

One of *Rock of Ages 3*'s marquee features is the new Make mode, a suite of creative tools for making your own courses and game types. I went looking for respite there, hoping to making my own stupid courses and big jumps, but the menus are too unwieldy and confusing for any creative juices to flow. They're clearly designed for a controller first, with some radial selection menus that disappeared half the time I tried to select anything. I made a few turns and jumps, but struggled to keep the runs smooth, fidgeting with the camera and terrain tools without much luck. I ran out of patience quickly. Someone else is going to have to save *Rock of Ages 3* for me, some noble and patient person that I'm not sure exists.

PLAYED IT

I don't know. I feel like I'm missing something here, like the true joy of *Rock of Ages* is something beyond my understanding. But this is a game about being large and fast and destructive entity, a terrifying and all-powerful mass wearing a big dumb grin, except you've been dropped into a world built to keep your natural tendencies and needs at bay. It's boulder hell in here, but instead of demons there are tragically charming paper dolls telling me to smile and look at the funny cyclops dancing around like a lollipop will make my problems disappear.

James Davenport

MOB RULE

Conquering **EMPIRE OF SIN**'s Chicago as Al Capone.

By Fraser Brown

THEATRE

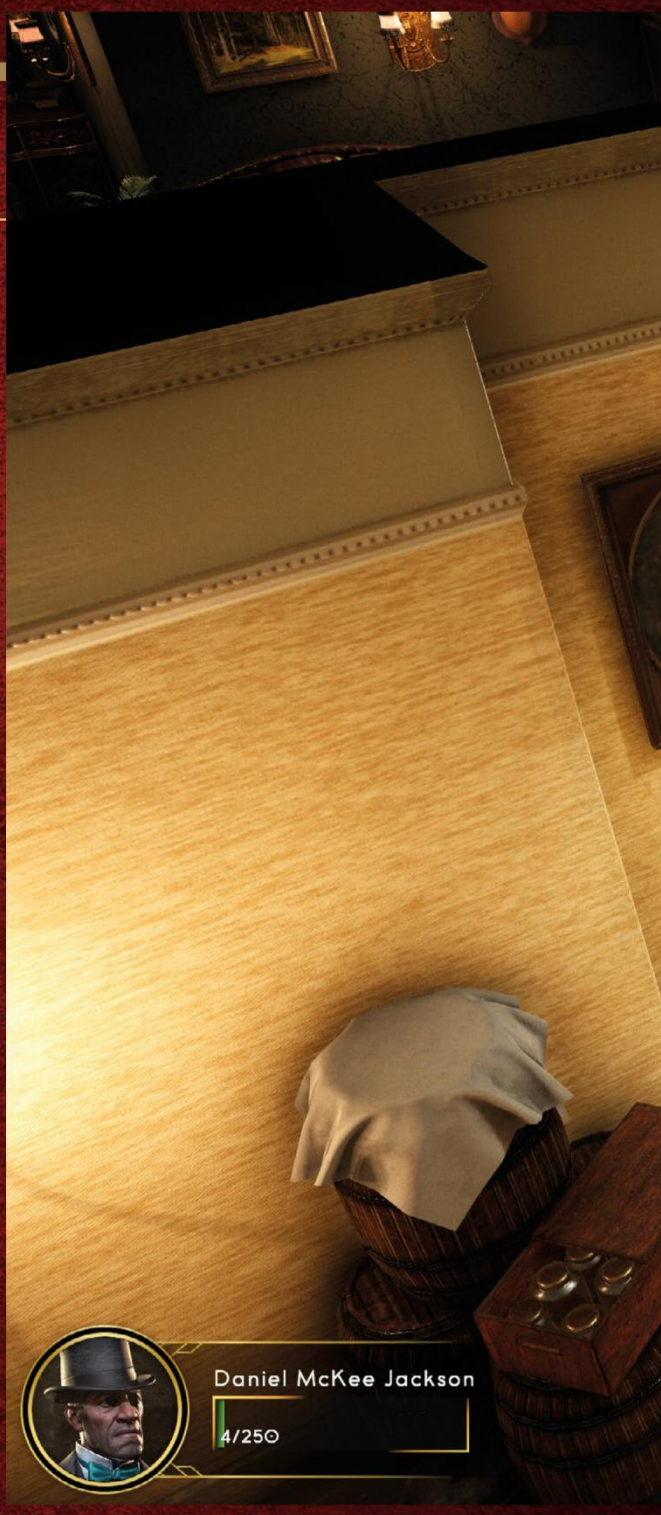
t's not an easy job, working for a prohibition-era Chicago mob boss. *Empire of Sin* lets you recruit and nurture a gang drawn from a pool of 60 crooks, all eager to make a name for themselves – and a buck or two – in the criminal underworld, but I suspect they would have had second thoughts if they'd known what was in store for them when I slipped into the shoes of the infamous Al Capone.

Capone's one of 14 playable mob bosses, some invented, some historical, and some even related to members of the team – like Elvira, a 70-year-old brothel owner based on John Romero's great-grandmother. It's a cast with a lot of big characters, and it features a level of diversity that you don't usually see in prohibition-inspired fiction, though it's one that's actually more true to life.

"I do think it was a significant design challenge," says game director Brenda Romero, who also has a family connection to one of the bosses. "Like, hey, we would like to have a 70-year-old woman as a boss. You know what? Why the fuck not? And it's especially important, as it's a nod to John's heritage. His grandmother and great-grandmother before that were the absolute matriarchs of the family. But that's a challenge because this is a combat game and you're pretty hardcore."

Despite her age, Elvira can handle herself pretty well, and she needs to, as bosses play a big role in gang warfare thanks to their unique abilities. She can use drugs to control minds, for instance, while Capone can spray a sizeable area with lead, suppressing and damaging anyone trying to move. Equally as impressive is his ability to keep sucking on that cigar even while he's beating a man to death in the park with a crowbar.

A CLOSE QUARTERS SCRAP IN A FILTHY ALLEY IS NOT AN ELEGANT THING



RIGHT: Just doing a spot of interior decorating, don't mind us.

BOTTOM LEFT: John Romero's great-grandmother means business.

ODD JOBS

Having already played some of the early game last year, I was dropped into a later save with several rackets up and running and a bunch of gangsters ready to do my bidding. I had cash, I had booze, and the future was looking bright for Al Capone. Ten minutes later, two of my gangsters were riddled with bullets and in critical condition.

Though it's a strategy game, *Empire of Sin* dips into RPG territory frequently. There are classes, talent trees, special traits, colour-coded loot, and plenty of missions and side quests. As my gang sauntered down the streets of Chicago, which can be pored over from the strategic world map view or explored close-up, we encountered a bloke with a missing wallet, and a few seconds later we were in combat with the thugs who'd pinched it.

A close quarters scrap in a filthy alley is not an elegant thing, especially when there are six people fighting and only one dumpster that can be used for cover. Everything is real-time with pause until combat begins, at which point it becomes turn-based and more evocative of *XCOM*. It's all cover and hit percentages and praying to the fickle gods of RNG. This time, they were ambivalent, letting us get through it alive but with some bad injuries. I'd only just started, but half of my gang was going to be out of commission for a whole year.

The severity of the combat is a more recent addition. At the end of fights, gangsters used to immediately get all of their health back, but now they're at risk even when they're not in critical condition, as health takes a lot longer to regenerate. It pays to employ some doctors in your gang, then, and they're just as capable in a scrap as any other goon on the mean streets.

"Originally, we wanted to reduce the amount of minding the player had to do with the crew," principal combat designer Ian O'Neill explains. "But it also reduced the strategic choices that the player had to make after combat." Med packs, doctors and a trip back to the safe

DRAGON'S DEN *Meet the new boss*

ALPHONSE CAPONE

The most infamous of *Empire's* bosses, Capone can unleash a torrent of lead that damages and suppresses enemies, as well as enjoying some cheaper distillery and brothel upgrades. And while he's a dick, his allies love him.

FRANKIE DONOVAN

Based on Brenda Romero's great-grandfather, Donovan is a melee brawler who starts the game with 100 barrels of expensive booze and some cheaper speakeasy upgrades. He's a charmer, too, so people forgive him for past conflicts.

GOLDIE GARNEAU

One of *Empire*'s fictional bosses, Garneau hides cunning under glamour. She makes more cash from speakeasies, gets along with other gangs and can fire three critical shots in succession, hurting anyone the bullets pass through.

DANIEL MCKEE JACKSON

Jackson's probably the best-dressed boss, and he's a champion of the downtrodden. He can also mark enemies to destroy their armour and ignore cover. He's sly, too, so building an empire won't generate as much threat.

house will get your gangsters back in tip-top shape, but the risk is heightened just enough so that the outcome of a battle isn't as simple as winning or losing – you can definitely have pyrrhic victories.

CRIMINAL PAST

So while the random diversions where you lend someone a hand or get into an impromptu fight seem inconsequential, they can still leave a mark. Maybe you'll end up having to deal with the cops or, like me, lose some key members of your gang. Then there's the more story-driven missions – stuff connected to specific bosses and characters. You could think of them like companion and personal quests to get involved in.

See, everyone's got a story in *Empire of Sin*. Relationships and traits develop over time, but characters will still start out with backgrounds and features that suggest they had a life before they suddenly turned up for work one day. They might have lovers, enemies or a

pocket full of grenades, and through their missions their past can sometimes catch up with them.

"It tells you a bit about their character, their history and motivations," says lead writer Katie Gardner. "For the historical bosses, we tried to use their actual history – what they did in real life. Like Daniel McKee Jackson had a real relationship with the mayor of Chicago, Bill Thompson, so we tried to use their relationship in his boss mission. And we always try to give choices as often as we can in these missions, so players have a lot of agency in how the mission goes."

Maria, one of the first gangsters you'll probably meet, quickly embroiled me in her dramatic life. There was her partner, Bruno, whom I had to hunt down when he disappeared, only to find him in a drunken stupor in another alley, necessitating another fight with some nearby thugs. Then there was a mysterious man from her past who had wronged her. She wanted me to kill him, and he was even willing to accept his fate, though he promised he was a changed man. I could have opted for mercy, but my trusty crowbar was thirsty.

With two gangsters down, I needed to recruit more bodies to protect me from bullets, but I'd already spent a chunk of cash. If I wanted more, I was going to have to improve my rackets. Businesses can be upgraded for a fee, beefing up their security or making them produce more profitable. If they're a bit on the quiet side, you can even do some marketing, spreading the word, on the low down, about your services. Then you can tailor them to the neighbourhoods they reside in, for example stocking the shelves of a speakeasy with high-end booze if it's in a prosperous area. You've got to match tastes and wallets.

"WE ALWAYS TRY TO GIVE CHOICES AS OFTEN AS WE CAN IN THESE MISSIONS"

BLOODY BUSINESS

Chicago is split into up to ten different neighbourhoods, and each has a slightly different character. One might give a bonus to casinos

LEFT: Not exactly the most understated attire for a holdup.

operating in the area, while another might be quiet because its residents live in fear of mob violence. The character of a neighbourhood can also be influenced, letting mob bosses develop red light districts, boozy havens, or sow terror.

"If you start going on a killing spree, killing thugs, killing cops, executing people, that will actually depress the prosperity of a neighbourhood and lead to people staying at home," senior game designer Chris King tells me. "But you can then use it as a tactic to depress the prosperity of neighbourhoods where you don't have a lot of rackets and actually depress the income of other gangs."

I had businesses going in two neighbourhoods, but my focus was on the Little Italy region, where I was competing with three other major gangs and several minor ones. There were still businesses I could swallow up if I wanted, but it was definitely starting to get a bit crowded. I'd been keeping the peace while trying to earn some more cash, even agreeing to an uneasy alliance with one of them, but I was itching to get into a fight.

An opportunity arrived in the form of the Canadian Maple Association, a group of bootleggers who smuggle booze from across the border. They had a deal with my new ally, but it wasn't working out. They wanted me to take their place on their latest delivery, and sabotage the distillery. I agreed, of course. I was able to walk right in and shamelessly poison the booze right in front of the workers. With the job done, my new friends promised lots of future work. My old friends however... well let's say they were less than impressed.

FACE OFF

Diplomacy between major gangs works in two ways. There's the regular diplomacy options that you get when dealing with all types of gangs, letting you trade, discuss deals, beg for cash, and declare war, and then there are the face-to-face sit-downs. It's an opportunity to bury hatchets, rile enemies up, or indulge in a new collaboration. Or you can just walk in and brazenly admit you sabotaged their distillery before telling your rival gang to go fuck themselves.

"What I love about this is that it gives the player the ability to have a degree of mastery over these characters if you get to know them," explains Romero. "The way that the AI works, it is trying to think like they would think. If you're a greedy son of a bitch, this is what you might do. If you're pretty hardcore, you might do something else. And Daniel McKee Jackson was known for being incredibly disciplined and principled. So you can start thinking, well, if I were that way, how might I handle that situation?"

I was at war with my former ally. I hadn't really prepared, so I quickly recruited some of that muscle I'd been meaning to hire. I found a burly bloke named Gibby – a demolitionist and the owner of the aforementioned pocketful of grenades. Once he arrived, I went straight for the throat.

MAKING A RACKET *Here's where the money's made*

HOTEL
The hotel racket hasn't been implemented yet, but it will eventually bump up the amount of punters in an area, filling up local businesses with thirsty visitors.

CASINO
Here's where you can bleed Chicago's gamblers dry; unfortunately this includes your own goons, who might develop a gambling addiction.

DISTILLERY
This is where you make the booze, deciding if you want to stock up on anything from poison to high shelf liquor.

BROTHEL
You can create your very own red light district, but not a very clean one. Watch the money and the STDs roll in.

SPEAKEASY
And this is where you sell your booze. What you serve is up to you, but you should tailor it to the neighbourhood's character. Just watch out for your gangsters turning into alcoholics.

Empire of Sin

ABOVE: You can admire your empire from afar with the strategic world view.

RIGHT: That fur coat is going to get a lot of blood on it.

You can chip away at other gangs by taking over their businesses, but you can also head straight for their safe house and kill the boss, inheriting everything in one fell swoop. That's risky, though, because bosses surround themselves with tougher gangsters and, thanks to their unique combat abilities, put up a better fight.

We stormed the hideout and, despite fewer numbers and a crappy starting location, we got to work clearing the building out very quickly, largely thanks to Gibby and his penchant for blowing stuff up. Unfortunately, the enemy boss had hired one of Gibby's pals, and Gibby didn't take it very well when his mate was blown sky high. It was really his fault, since it was his grenade, but he took it out on me. He quit the gang, right there and then, and walked straight out the door. He didn't even give me two weeks' notice.

Thankfully, we still managed to win the fight, immediately netting me lots of businesses, cash and loot, none of which Gibby would benefit from. He made a big mistake, but being a generous boss I'd eventually rehire him. I shared his love of big explosions and I missed him. Mechanically, however, we didn't have any sort of relationship. While *Empire of Sin*'s gangsters are all part of a network of friendships and beefs, the bosses are above it all.

KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL

"I think it's just that, as you're the mob boss, we don't actually want to say you like this gangster, dislike this one and are in love with that gangster," says King.

"That's more something you can decide, who you like and who you dislike, rather than have the game tell you these are your friends."

You're the puppet master, pulling on everyone's strings rather than getting tangled up in them. But only if that's how you want to play it. You can still choose to favour specific members of your gang, giving them more responsibilities by making them the capo of one of your neighbourhoods, but you won't be able to start taking them out on romantic excursions – not unless your grand idea of romance is a corpse-filled casino.

My betrayal paid off and I gained total control of the neighbourhood, which happens when you own the majority of its rackets. Conveniently, you don't need to take over every single one of them and completely run the other gangs out of the area, you just need to be the top dog. I had a taste for it, however, so I started crushing all the minor gangs and strengthening my grip over the area. Before long I had two neighbourhoods largely under my control, as well as a few new enemies.

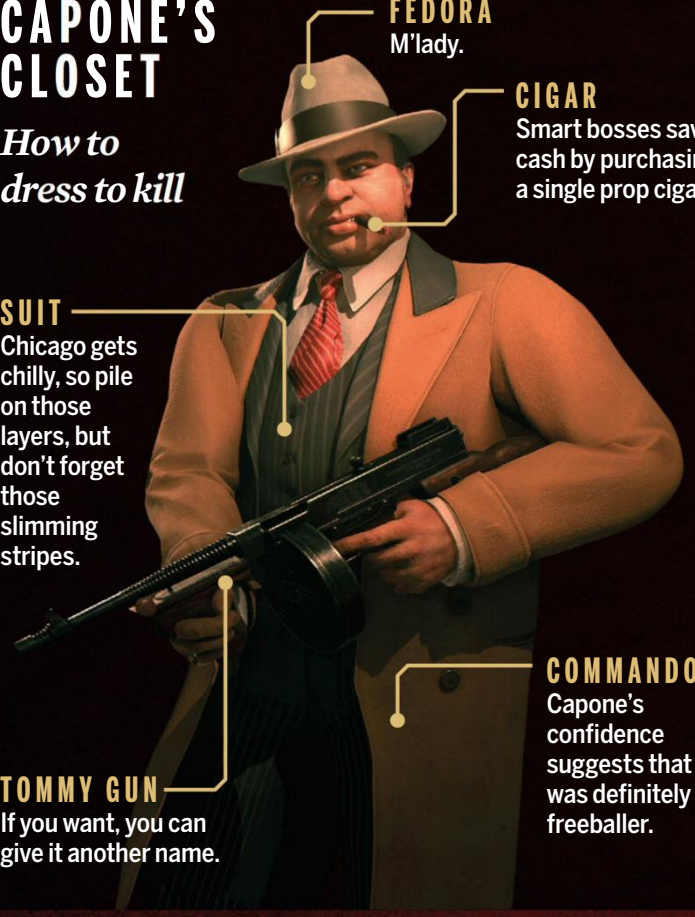
All this conquest was taking its toll on my employees. Gibby, newly returned to the fold, almost died in a speakeasy fight, the guy I'd hired to be our surgeon had become a bloodthirsty psychopath, and three of them got an STD all in the same day. Gangsters can get traits from combat, but they can also get them by just hanging out in brothels for too long. Some negative traits, like the STDs, can be cured, while others are just part of their history. Now, I'm not going to judge what anyone does when they're off the clock, but brothel shenanigans while on the job crosses the line. I'd sent them to take over the place, not use its services. Then there was their loyalty to worry about. Members of your gang can even start working for your enemies, and you'll have to rely on the rest of your crew to root out traitors.

WHACK A MOLE

"There are no grey areas in gang life, now or 1920," says Romero. "When a

CAPONE'S CLOSET

How to dress to kill



gangster thinks that there might be a mole in your crew, you're put in a situation where they all point the finger at somebody. They're giving you their best guess, but they might be wrong. It could be that you decide 'Yep, I agree with you guys and that's the person' and off somebody. If you're wrong, there will be consequences to that. If you're right, you stop the free flow of information from your group."

Thankfully, they were all still well enough and loyal enough to help me pinch another distillery – my patrons were getting thirsty – from another former ally whom I betrayed. I'm awful and nobody should trust me. You can attack a gang before you're formally at war, so we just walked through the front door, got into a favourable position and then let loose. Even when you're dealing with already hostile gangs or groups of unaffiliated thugs roving the streets, there are opportunities to get the drop on them and set your gangsters up in real-time before the turn-based combat kicks off.

INSTEAD I ADDED INSULT TO INJURY, GOADING HIM INTO ALL-OUT WAR

What was unexpected was the invitation for a sit-down, rather than an immediate declaration of war. My fellow boss wanted to talk. Maybe I could have given him back the distillery and smoothed things over, but that didn't seem like a very Al Capone thing to do. Instead I added insult to injury, goading him into all-out war. I had big plans for the rest of his rackets.

Those plans unfortunately never came to fruition, as my time was up. None of my employees actually died, so maybe I'm not such a bad boss after all. Running a gang is still a tricky business, though. It's not challenging in the conventional sense, perhaps, though battles can turn bad pretty quickly, but there are a lot of things vying for your attention, and focusing too much on one can have a detrimental effect on other parts of your criminal empire. The variety on offer is also a massive hook, however, and it looks like Romero Games has managed to squeeze a huge amount of that into *Empire of Sin*. ■

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SHODAN SHOWDOWN

Irrational Games co-founder Jonathan Chey on the difficult development of **SYSTEM SHOCK 2** – and how he's still finding new inspiration in it today.

By Alex Wiltshire

For me, *System Shock 2* is one of the all-time greats. Tying together sharp storytelling, taut gunplay and RPG character development, all set on a claustrophobic spaceship that drips with horror-inflected tension, it was the gateway to the immersive sim classics to come, such as *BioShock*, *Dishonored*, and *Prey*. For its makers, though, *System Shock 2* was a test.

It was the first project by a new studio called Irrational Games, a chance to prove it could deliver a game that matched the calibre of Looking Glass, the developer of the original *System Shock*, *Thief*, and other PC classics. "It was probably the most pressure I've felt in my life," says Jonathan Chey, one of its three lead developers. "My strongest motivation was not wanting to look like a fool, because we'd never done anything like this before in our lives."

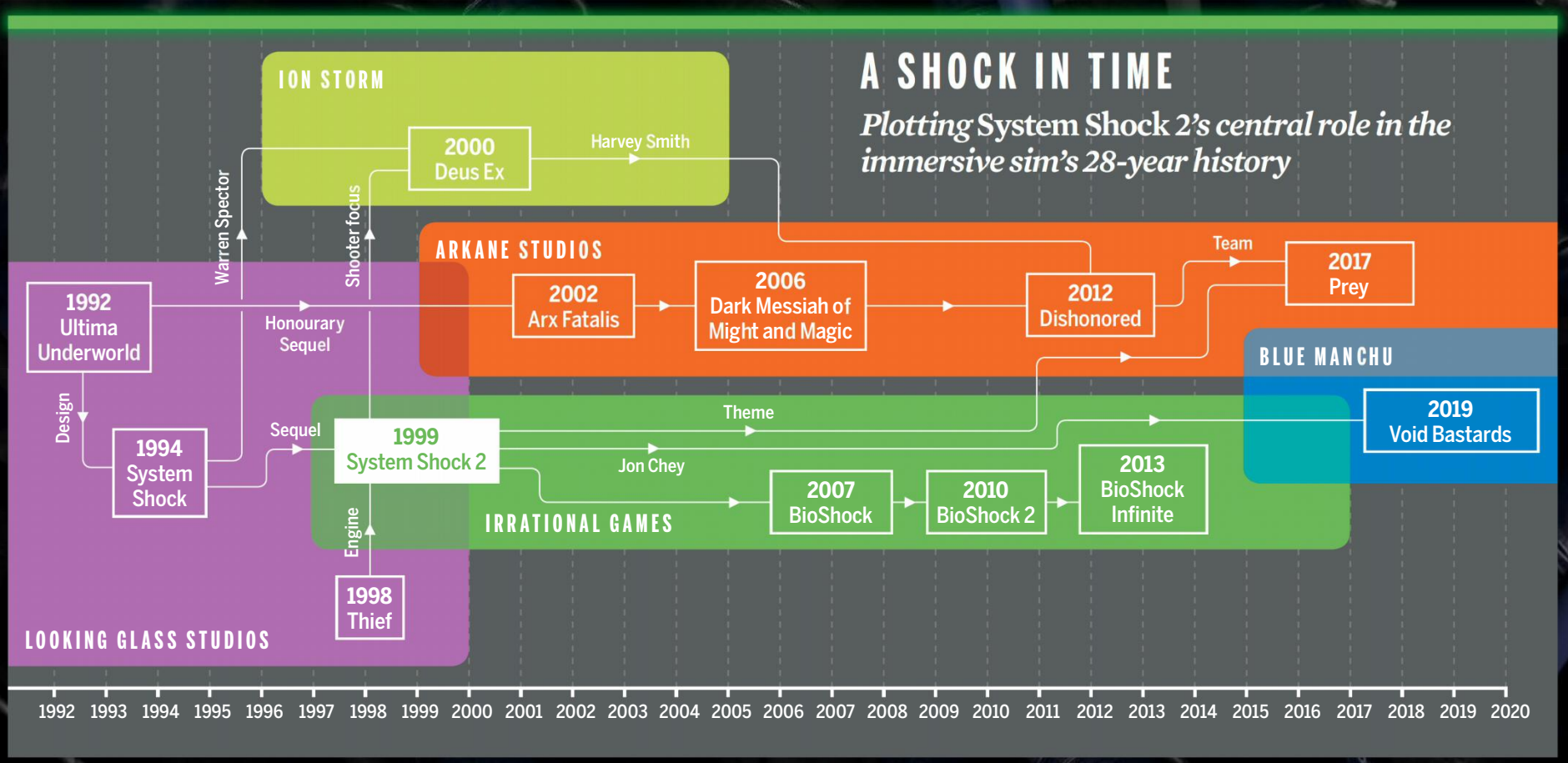
Now, over 20 years later, Chey can say the gamble worked. *System Shock 2*'s sci-fi horror adventure made Irrational Games' name, laying the foundation for a future in which it would make the likes of *SWAT 4*, *Freedom Force* and, of course, *BioShock*, and lately, Chey has found himself returning to it for inspiration. At the time, though, it didn't quite light up the charts. Sure, it was critically lauded, but for Chey and his fellow founders, Ken Levine and Rob Fermier, it was simply enough.

ABOVE: *System Shock 2*'s Von Braun is home to mechs as well as more biological enemies.

ORIGIN STORY

These three developers, two programmers and a writer, met after joining Looking Glass, where Fermier had worked on the first *System Shock*. Ken Levine had contributed to *Thief: The Dark Project*'s initial story and design, while Chey programmed for *Thief* and *Flight Unlimited 2*. They were young and not terribly experienced, and they wanted to found their own company. But they had already learned something important from Looking Glass.

"They weren't a company that did small, highly polished products," says Chey. "They were a company that did vast, sprawling, ambitious things that always overreached. That's one of the things we really loved about their games, and we inherited that kind of ambition and way of working, which was to do things that were probably – well, definitely – well beyond what was realistically achievable with the



"THEY WERE A COMPANY THAT DID VAST, SPRAWLING, AMBITIOUS THINGS THAT ALWAYS OVERREACHED"

budget and time and personnel that were available. That's how we were taught to make games, and the only way we knew to make games."

They decided on a name (rejecting Chocolate Milk Productions and Underwater Horse) and scored a deal with French publisher Cyro to create a singleplayer campaign for an isometric action game called *FireTeam*. But they were left hanging when Cyro decided to make the game multiplayer-only. Fortunately, they'd stayed friends with their former employers, who rescued them with a huge opportunity: a sequel to *System Shock*, the already celebrated first-person sci-fi RPG which Looking Glass had released in 1994. "We were given an enormous amount of responsibility, and for not very good reasons," says Chey.

The team took a couple of rooms in Looking Glass' office, some staff, the Dark engine, which was still under development for *Thief*, and a meagre budget of $700,000. "The whole development process was us pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, not a very big budget, and trying to put together a team and run a project and do things we'd never done before," says Chey. "So most of the time we were just trying to stay afloat, and to come up with good ideas. We certainly didn't have expectations about producing something that people would really enjoy, though of course you're always hoping for the best."

CHARACTER-BUILDING

But the team worked well together, dividing up responsibilities so that Chey managed the project, Levine was in charge of design and story, and Fermier was in charge of technology. And they all agreed on a very clear vision for what they wanted to make: a worthy follow-up to the original *System Shock* but with a stronger story and a greater focus on character building and mechanical progression. "*System Shock* was maybe trying to be a bit cleverer than we were," says Chey. "It was trying to innovate on almost every front, whereas we kept a lot of the core principles, and then layered more conventional RPG systems on top."

TOP: Ah, the birth of dramatic irony through environmental design.

“A LOT OF IT FELT VERY SIMILAR TO MAKE. I ENDED UP WRITING SOME OF THE SAME CODE I WROTE NEARLY 20 YEARS BEFORE”

System Shock, after all, had transposed *Ultima Underworld*’s pioneering fully 3D first-person roleplaying to a sci-fi setting only a year after *Doom*’s release. Trapped on a space station which had been taken over by SHODAN, its now-homicidal AI, your task was to explore its tightly wound decks, fight cyborgs, solve puzzles, and envelop yourself in cyberspace, in order to stop it firing a mining laser on Earth. There was a lot going on in *System Shock*. You could even play little games of *Pong* and *Missile Command* in its UI windows if you wanted.

But though it had evolved from an RPG, *System Shock* focused on action and gave little opportunity to develop your character. A door was left wide open for Irrational to build on it. “I guess we figured out a little earlier than some other people that it was very easy to add RPG mechanics to all kinds of existing game types, and that in doing so you made the game much richer,” says Chey. And so in *System Shock 2* you level up your various skills – hacking, energy weapons, psionic powers – and attributes with the Cybernetic Modules you’re rewarded with and find scattered around the decks of its setting, the science ship Von Braun. You find nanites, which are a currency for buying items from Replicators and paying for hacking into terminals and locked crates. You can also choose between some powerful O/S Upgrades.

These systems let you create with a good degree of freedom your own character build as you run through the Von Braun: do you want to be psi-powered adept, or a soldier? A hacker and repair expert? The multiple ways of facing the storyline’s challenges prefigured the similar focus on stats and skills that came in *Deus Ex* in the following year.

ABOVE: *Void Bastards* is Chey’s most recent game, an indie shooter directly inspired by *System Shock 2*.

Although they were a big part of *System Shock 2*’s appeal to players, for Chey its RPG features were simply a product of the budget he had to work with. Having seen *Half-Life* release during development, he knew that they didn’t have a chance of building a game with anything like the sophistication of its AI or its scripted in-engine narrative sequences. “We had to do things that were relatively cheap to implement,” he says. “RPG mechanics are quite cheap to build and they’re very satisfying.”

Levine’s story, meanwhile, would have to be told through emails and voice recordings, just as they were in the first *System Shock*. It’s decidedly functional, but the way it’s delivered within the fiction of the world gives immediacy to a tale in which SHODAN is now on your side – or so it appears – as you both battle a worse threat. As she snipes and chastises you for not performing her tasks fast enough, *System Shock 2* sets up a theme about player agency which Levine would go on to play with in the excellent *BioShock*.

RATION RATIONALE

System Shock 2 *was built around the idea that the p ayer should always be hungry*

“It wasn’t designed as a power fantasy game,” says Chey. You spent the game always coveting a better weapon or upgrade. It feels great to play, but as with so much about *System Shock 2*, it was really about keeping things under budget. “It’s quite easy to create a desire for stuff by rationing things rather than constantly giving the player shiny new toys. Every shiny new toy has to be developed to be exciting and interesting for the player. It’s not going to be that cheap to make, probably.”

AFTERSHOCK

But for all *System Shock 2*’s achievements and legacy, it was a stepping stone. Chey feels its sales potential was hampered by its budget, and the studio’s fortunes were hampered by a deal they’d struck with Looking Glass which meant that even if it was a hit, Irrational wouldn’t have made much money out of it. “God know what our royalty percentage was,” says Chey.

"I'm sure it was tiny. We had no expectations of becoming rich. Our strategy was, let's make a really great game to set us up as a developer that people would want to work with in the future and so we could cut a better deal for our next product."

Sure enough, the studio's next game – *Freedom Force*, which Chey directed – got a much bigger budget. "We were able to spend a bit more time and we weren't quite so much against the wall." And eventually, after *Tribes: Vengeance* and *SWAT 4*, they commanded enough money to make *BioShock*, which added big-budget presentation and sanded down some of *System Shock 2*'s rougher edges (inventory system, interface, weapon degradation).

"Some people, I'm sure, would think it was dumbing down the product, but I don't regard *BioShock* as dumbed-down. I regard it as a much more accessible version and, in fact, much smarter about a lot of things. There was a lot to learn from *System Shock 2*. We'd thrown a lot of things together very quickly and some of them worked really well, and some of them didn't." *BioShock* was the studio's first true hit.

ABOVE: *System Shock 2* ramps up the horror from the sinister threat of the original.

Chey left Irrational in 2009 and founded a new company called Blue Manchu. Its first game was something completely different, the excellent collectible card-cum-turn-based strategy game *Card Hunter*. But as he began to plan its second, Chey replayed *System Shock*. He found himself enjoying its combat and the way monsters roam the ship, but didn't like the way that there's little point in revisiting cleared areas of the ship. So at the core of *Void Bastards*, the rogue-like first-person shooter his studio released last year, Chey is exploring *System Shock 2*'s combat more deeply, translating many of its simulation-based features, such as the way monsters respond to audio, lockable doors, and a wide toolset of weapons and traps, into endless procedurally built levels.

"A lot of it felt very similar to make," he says. "I ended up writing some of the same code I wrote nearly 20 years before." And he's been revisiting *System Shock 2* in another way, too. One of his favourite games of the past decade is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, in which he can see echoes of the *System Shock* series in the way its systems interact, such as rolling physics balls down hills and using the Rune abilities. "I felt that the designers must have played some of the games we worked on, or the games that influenced us, and because I loved that game so much, that was a wonderful feeling. One of the [most] satisfying things about being a creative developer is feeling you're part of the ever-growing state of the art." ■

THE LONG GOODBYE

How **DLC** gave us closure when the base game couldn't.

By Sean Martin

WARNING: Contains spoilers for *Mass Effect 3*, *Metro Exodus*, and *Frostpunk*

Endings are difficult. When you have to tie up every loose end, answer every question, and offer a climactic payoff so players feel their actions were significant, it starts to stretch the boundaries of what a single game can accomplish. It's no wonder that, almost paradoxically, epilogues in the form of DLC are often more impactful than their main game's ending. In *Witcher 3*'s *Blood and Wine*, I found Geralt's well-earned retirement to Toussaint far more satisfying and reflective than defeating the Wild Hunt. In *Fallout: New Vegas*' *Lonesome Road*, I think Ulysses' reflection on player choice and that "If war doesn't change, men must change" elevates it beyond even the base game in terms of its meta significance to the *Fallout* series.

DLC is a unique opportunity to both compliment and separate, for developers to shine light where there was no opportunity in the main game, but also create another layer of meaning which improves that base experience. Most significant of all, DLC offers us a chance to say goodbye: one last adventure or mission to grant catharsis, to both rationalise and commemorate the impact a game has on our lives.

SHEPARD'S BYE

Reflecting on base games with ineffectual endings, you'd struggle to come across a title more relevant than *Mass Effect 3*. If anything, the initial uproar relating to that final paragon or renegade choice was based upon the fact it wasn't personal; it told players little about their iteration of Commander Shepard or, more importantly, the connections they'd made along the way. Characters are the heart of *Mass Effect*, but as you pinball around the galaxy, racing against Reapers consuming all life on earth, was there time or space for a meaningful reflection of what those relationships meant to players?

"The ending of *Mass 3* was very serious in tone," explains Chris Hepler, a writer on *Mass Effect 3*'s DLC. "It's pretty much what you have to do, if you write an ending where the Reapers have fed two billion Earthlings into DNA juicers and everyone's sacrificing themselves to ensure that the entire galaxy doesn't share the same fate. But when the time came for the last DLC of the series, any dramatic conflict wasn't going to top the galaxy-spanning scale of *Mass 3*'s climax. So we knew we had to make the big things small and the small things big. We had to make it more personal."

The result of that personal approach was *Citadel*, a DLC which allowed players to take shore leave with their crew on the bustling metropolis of *Mass Effect*'s hub station. It not only gave players a space to interact with their favourite characters, it offered a completely new side to them, only visible once the apocalyptic stakes of the main game were put on ice. But that doesn't mean *Citadel* was without action. If anything, players were forced to battle their greatest foe yet: themselves.

"WE WANTED TO EMBRACE ALL OF IT, RIGHT DOWN TO THE JOKES ABOUT HOW BAD SHEPARD'S DANCING WAS"

"When designing any villain or climactic battle, you ask yourself: what's a great final fight that we haven't seen before? The idea of Shepard battling a foe with powers based upon your choices naturally fed into the conflict of Shepard vs Shepard – a villain that was as much a dark reflection of the hero as you could get," says Hepler. "We asked ourselves 'why is the player going to have a good time triumphing?'. Because it'll be the emotional payoff of all the connections and effort they made along the way. Shepard literally says in the final fight 'I got my scars on Feros, Noveria, Virmire, and Ilos. You got yours from a petri dish'. The clone thinks they have everything, but didn't count on Shepard's lived experience."

Shepard vs Shepard is not only a reflection on your legacy as the character, but also upon how your Shepard is nothing without their supporting cast – friends, comrades, and lovers, who fight alongside you, share your ideals, and, if push comes to shove, will even die for you. It's the perfect face-off for a DLC which calls attention to the relationships that have shaped who your Shepard has become. Though *Citadel* sees you share a variety of its amusements with those characters, one of its most important moments is the infamous party scene.

"The party took a long time to come together," explains Hepler "We speculated a lot about what happens when you put all these characters together in a room, and which

NIGHT TERRORS *"Wolves asleep amidst the trees"*

Another fascinating use of DLC can be found in the *Witcher 3*'s *Blood and Wine*. In the expansion, we are introduced to higher vampire, Orianna, who has a penchant for drinking the blood of children and singing a creepy nursery rhyme. The last time we see her in *Blood and Wine*, Geralt makes a promise to hunt her down after he's finished his business in Toussaint. But what's strange and somewhat astounding is we can actually see Geralt doing just that in the *Witcher 3*'s launch trailer, A Night to Remember, which was released over a year before *Blood and Wine*. This means that the trailer that launched the *Witcher 3*, pretty amazingly, also concludes it from a narrative perspective.

combinations would be novel and amusing. Some had conflicts that felt natural – Grunt and Wrex headbutting each other, or James and Jacob having the push-up contest. Some took the proverbial ball and ran with it together like Zaeed and Garrus, or the nerds trying to recite the periodic table when dancing drunk.

"We wanted to embrace all of it, right down to the jokes about how bad Shepard's dancing was, or even the fans that wanted to slap Jacob."

In the final hours of *Mass Effect 3*, in the forward base in London, you get an opportunity to say goodbye to the series' characters. But those farewells always felt wrong to me: too public, too self-aware, wrapped up in the galactic context of defeating the Reapers. Those sombre goodbyes felt like they were saying 'remember how these characters died'. But as a downloadable content, *Citadel* is more about giving you space to see how they lived. That no matter what happens in the end, there will always be this. You. These characters. This time.

"The scene that I still remember the most is easily Jack's," recalls Hepler. "She says she wants Shepard to get a tattoo with her, but you find out it's more than a drunken impulse. She says in their line of work, their bodies may be unidentifiable, and if they pull Shepard out from under some rubble, she'll want to know the truth rather than be left hanging the rest of her life. Well... in the post-credits scene, the rubble twitches, and that tattoo takes on a different meaning as you realise Shepard and Jack may see each other again. There's a psychological study out there that says what people most remember from their favourite entertainment media isn't the plot, but characters. In the end, I think we made something that the whole team felt like they had ownership over, and that translated to many fans feeling like they'd done the right thing choosing to live with these characters for so long."

TUNNEL VISION

Closure is a broad term, and there's a tendency amongst much DLC towards answering questions that the main game can't, especially when there isn't an appropriate perspective with which to do so. The *Metro* games, based on Dmitry Glukhovsky's book series about a post-apocalyptic Moscow underground, have always centred around the character Artyom. But similar to the book series' shifting perspectives, the games' DLC has always explored the stories of its other characters.

"The Metro books provide a huge amount of lore, but the games themselves have many layers of narration,"

FAR LEFT: The main antagonist of *Citadel* is a backup clone of your Commander Shepard, created by Cerberus during *Mass Effect 2*.

LEFT: Stories get told from different perspectives in *Metro: Exodus*' DLC.

BELOW: Depending upon the choices you make throughout the games, which characters attend your *Citadel* party can differ greatly.

“EACH OF OUR CHARACTERS HAS SOMETHING TO TELL... AS WELL AS SOMETHING TO HIDE”

explains Jon Bloch, executive producer on *Metro: Exodus*. “DLC lets us step outside of the main games’ storytelling paradigm where the player, essentially, becomes Artyom and experiences the world though Artyom’s eyes. Each of our characters has something to tell... as well as something to hide. DLC allows us to tell those stories that Artyom simply never had a chance of hearing.”

A recent example of this is *Two Colonels*, a story which jumps back and forth between the perspective of Colonel Miller and Colonel Khlebnikov, the second in command of Novosibirsk’s metro. When players arrive in the haunted city in the main game, any survivors are long gone, save for Khlebnikov’s son, who gives you a vague account of its downfall. *Two Colonels* seeks to tell that story, but also, exhibiting another tendency of DLCs, explain how Khlebnikov’s sacrifice allowed Artyom to survive and the complete *Exodus*’ main story. This sacrifice also parallels Miller’s final act, which can be understood as a reclamation of power from the corrupt authorities who failed him.

“In both cities, the governments lied to the people they controlled for ‘the greater good’. Yes, Moscow seems to be more fortunate than Novosibirsk but ultimately they are on the same path to ruin. Khlebnikov and Miller alike are just instruments in somebody else’s hands,” explains Bloch. “The story of Novosibirsk does provide an important counterpoint to the story of Moscow Metro, but even more importantly, it fleshes out Miller’s

ABOVE: *The Last Autumn* explores a period before global cooling caused civilisation to collapse, and the oceans to freeze.

RIGHT: *Sam’s Story* is another *Exodus*’ DLC which explores the American member of the Spartans, as he journeys home to find his father.

motivation in his final decision to try and save Artyom's life by sacrificing his own."

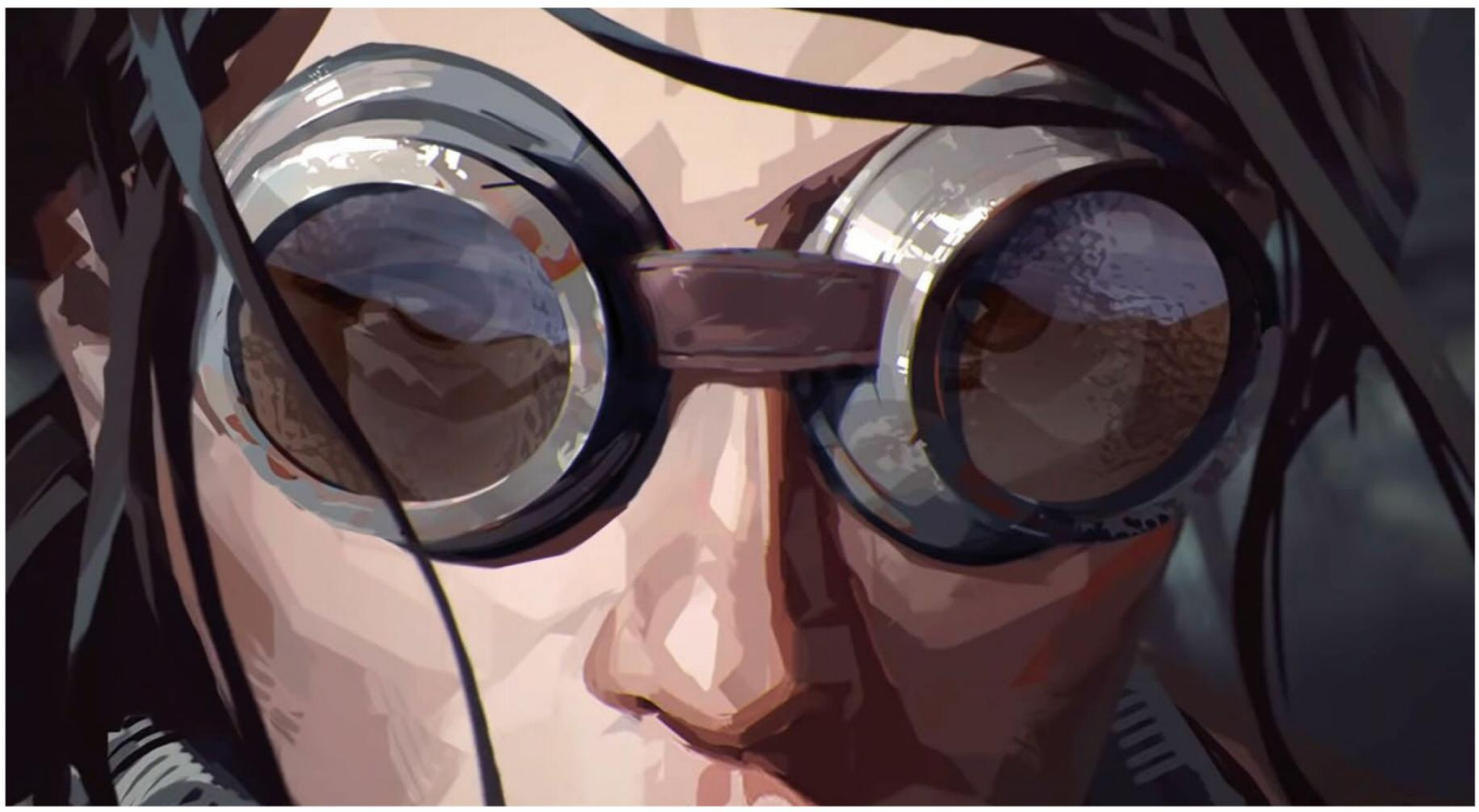
FALL OUT

Narrative strategy game *Frostpunk* takes this prequel idea one step further, using its DLC to show us the very origins of its desolate setting. The base game's scenarios are its tool for telling stories from across its icy, apocalyptic setting, inherently human tales about people undergoing the hardships of climate change and what they are willing to do to survive. But DLC *The Last Autumn* uses its different scenarios to tell the stories of those who made it possible for anyone to even have a chance of continuing on after the apocalypse, by building one of the colossal, life-sustaining generators which heat *Frostpunk*'s cities.

"The time before the Fall has this melancholy and allure of seeing the world with all its imperfections, but at the same time being fully aware of how it's all going to end," says Jakub Stokalski, project lead on *Frostpunk*. "This tension allows us to push the emotional stakes in the scenario: you know what will happen to those who end up away from the safety of a generator. But at the same time, *The Last Autumn* is not only about this feeling of external danger. It focuses on whether you're willing to make people sacrifice for others they might never meet."

But as Stokalski also explains, *Frostpunk*'s icy setting is equipped to explore these stories. "This particular brand of an apocalypse – the Great Frost – demands people bunch up to survive, while at the same time everything around them dies, isolating them. Comparison to *Fallout*'s Vaults is quite apt. Each scenario has a very defined core. Refugees is about facing those who wronged you in the past from a position of power: will you abuse it, or reconcile old wrongs? The Arks are about duty: is an abstract and long-term goal of keeping a future for the planet more important than saving those in need here and now? It's even more interesting if you think about the consequences: all of these enclaves have their own story, their own narrative, and different people will come out of them if they survive."

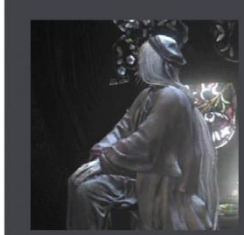
BELOW: DLC in *Frostpunk* is split into a number of different scenarios, exploring different stories.



As all of these games demonstrate, DLC is an incredible tool for tying up loose ends: whether that's providing players and developers a chance to say goodbye, allowing us to inhabit mysterious characters or resolve questions beyond the reach of a main game, or by creating a spectrum of stories, letting us better understand the game-world. As Stokalski reflects, it's important we remember what DLC can do. "It's easy to treat DLC as just post-release filler, especially in the era of games-as-service. I don't see it that way. It's nice to be able to focus on what matters most: creating meaningful, strong experiences, rather than wrangling with the frustrating realities of new title production. Post-release content can and should be a meaningful, viable part of a game in its own right. DLC should be worth a players' time to play, and worth our time to make." ■

THE UNCHOSEN UNDEAD

Dark Souls 3 *used its DLC to introduce game-changing new characters*

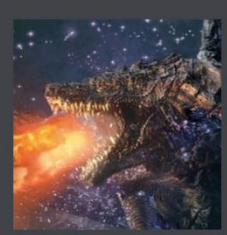


THE PAINTER

In the painted world of Ariamis, a girl sits before a blank canvass. Known as the Painter, she dreams of using the Dark Soul to paint a gentle world.

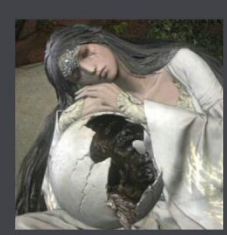
SISTER FRIEDE

The last sister of the Sable church of Londor, Friede fights to keep things the way they are refusing to let the flame of rebirth blossom.



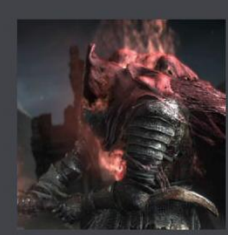
DARKEATER MIDIR

The last of the ancient dragons, raised by the gods, and given the duty of fighting the dark which gnaws at the roots of the world.



PRINCESS FILIANORE

Lord of Cinders Gwyn's youngest daughter, whose eternal slumber keeps the world from ending; the gods' final trick.



SLAVE KNIGHT GAEL

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REVIEW

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We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia*, *Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky*, *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey*, *NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch*, *Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta*, *Dishonored 2*

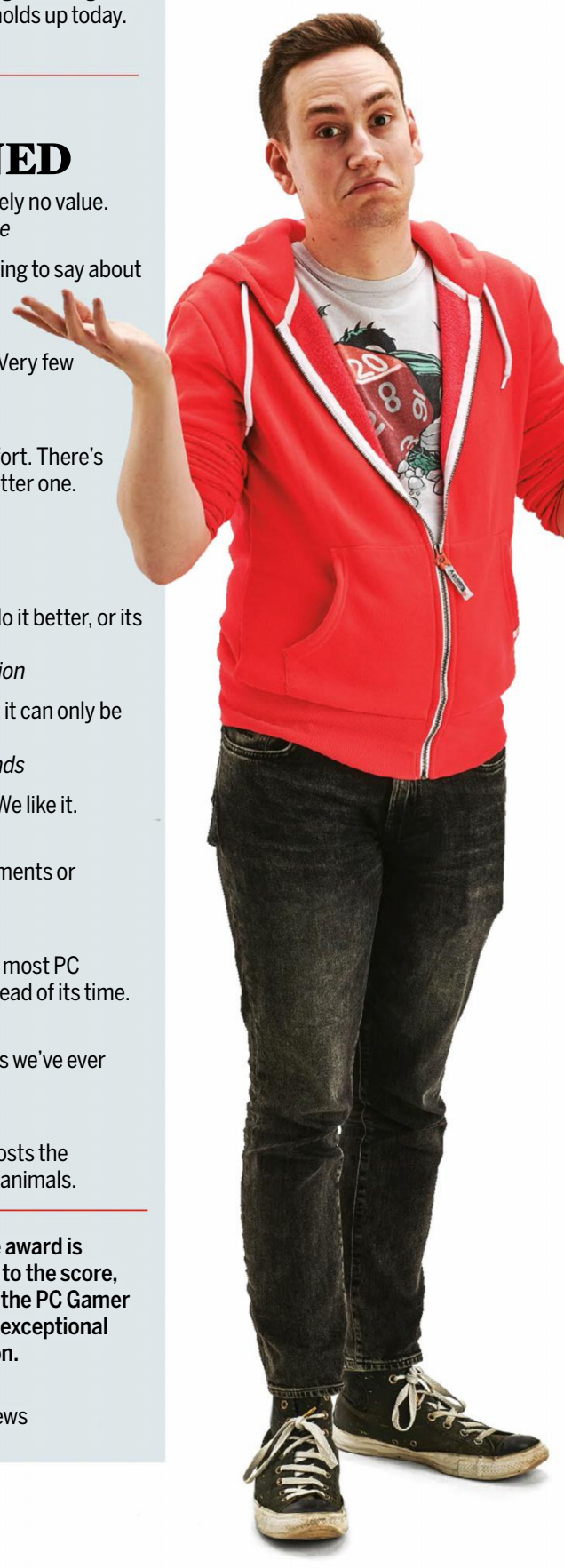
95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2*, *Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Lockdown downloads

When Capcom, riding high on a wave of overwhelming critical acclaim for the stunning *Resident Evil 2*, announced it was following up with a remake of *Resi 3* next, it seemed an easy home run. But there were two things we could not possibly have predicted. The first was that, by the time of its launch in April 2020, its tale of fighting for survival and scavenging for supplies in a city rendered utterly nightmarish by an unanticipated viral outbreak would seem hopelessly optimistic relative to the view out of our own windows. The second was that it would be a bit disappointing. My point is, life is full of surprises, and they're not always nice. Stay home, stay safe, and, if you can, enjoy some PC games.

ROBIN VALENTINE
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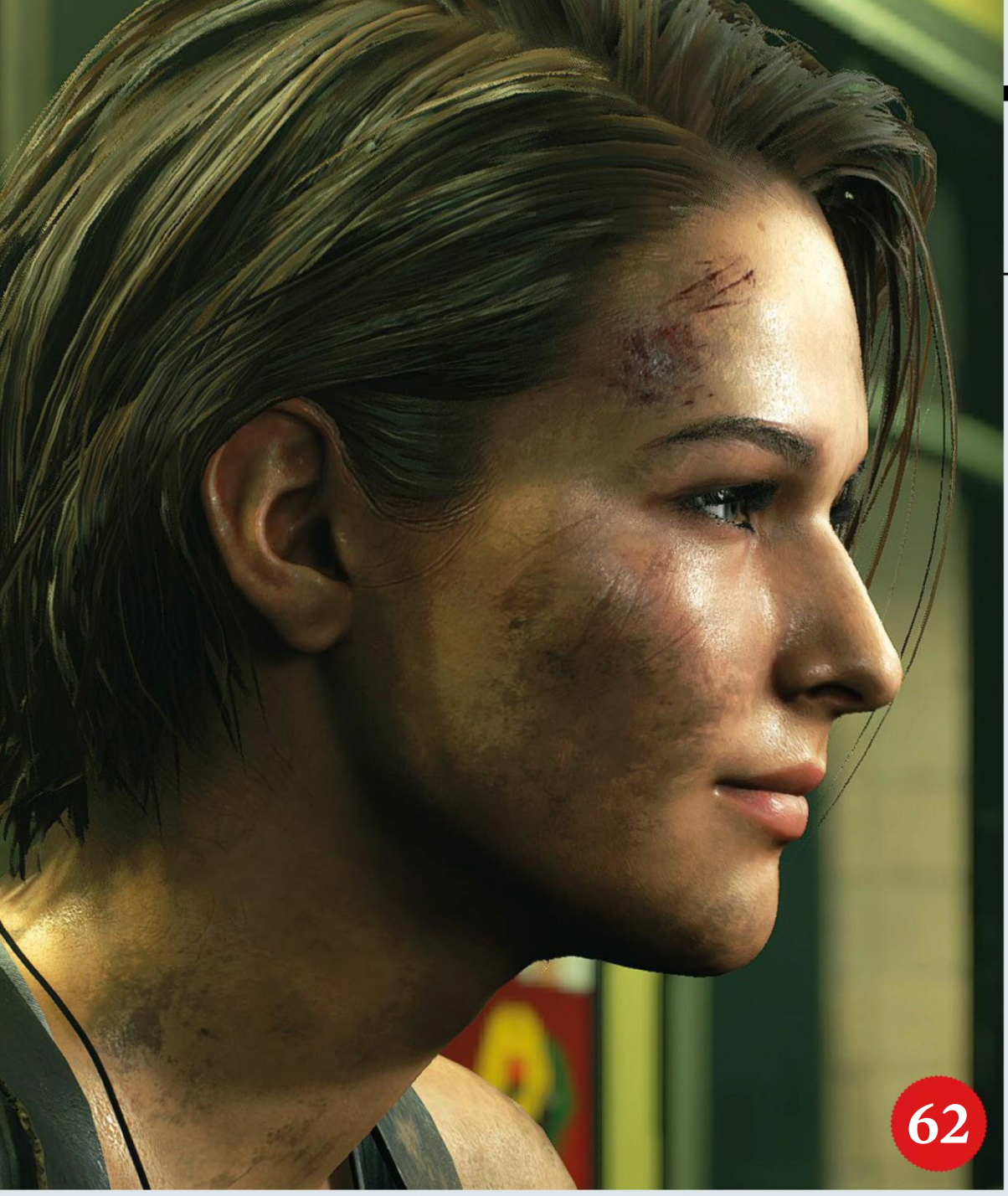
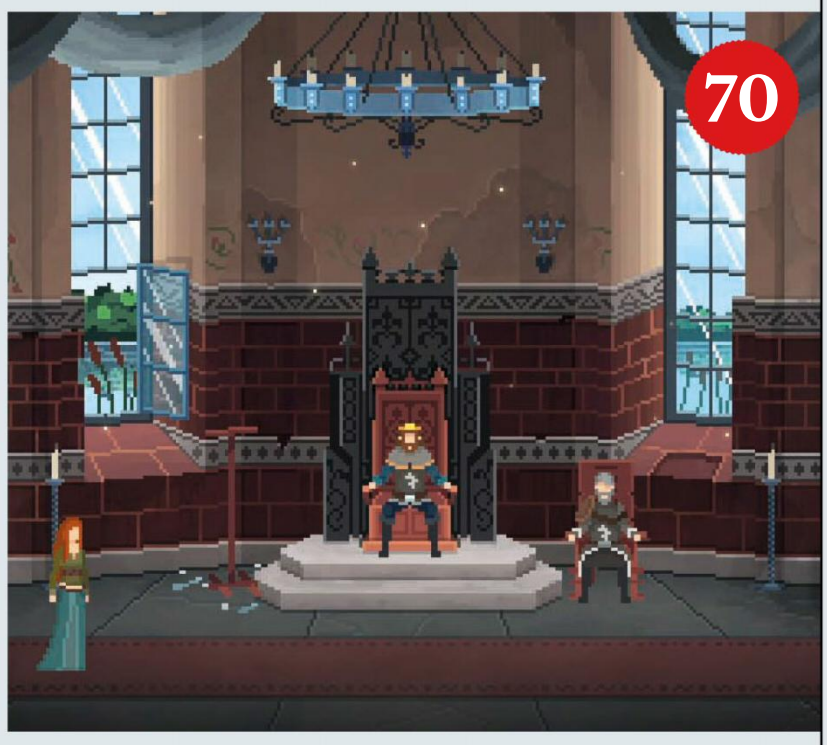
LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer





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This month's hard-bitten survivors...

ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Scripted stalkers
Currently playing
Resident Evil 3
This month
Found a few downsides to being chased by a relentless mutant super soldier.

MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Future death sports
Currently playing
Bleeding Edge
This month
Realised it takes more than a half-woman, half-motorbike to make a game fun.

RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Deep sea reviewing
Currently playing
In Other Waters
This month
Saw an entire alien ocean in a few dots and squiggles. Hell of an imagination.

LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Medieval politics
Currently playing
Yes, Your Grace
This month
Carried an entire kingdom to peace and prosperity, and boy are his arms tired.

TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Night yowling
Currently playing
Rev
This month
Discovered there's more than one definition of the term 'fox hunting'.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Making enemies
Currently playing
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor
This month
Had a great time getting absolutely nothing done.

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Capcom breaks its streak with **RESIDENT EVIL 3**, a half-baked remake that falls flat in almost every respect. ***By Andy Kelly***

When I first encountered the Nemesis in *Resident Evil 3*, a monstrous bio-weapon sent by the Umbrella Corporation to hunt and kill protagonist Jill Valentine, I felt my pulse rise. This towering stack of ugly muscle can move alarmingly fast, snag you with a pair of slimy tentacles, and even use weapons, including a colossal rocket launcher. You can outrun the Tyrant in the Resident Evil 2 remake fairly easily. Wait for a gap to open up, then slip through it. The worst he can really do is give you a firm slap. But running can't save you from the Nemesis.

It stalks you relentlessly through the zombie-ravaged streets of Raccoon City, and always feels one step ahead of you. Seeing something *that* big and scary move so quickly is really unnerving, and for this first hour or so, I was starting to think this *might* be the scariest *Resident Evil* game ever.

At this point I assumed *Resident Evil 3* would be one long, tense game of cat and mouse against a dynamic and unpredictable enemy – and I think that's what lots of fans will have been expecting going in. But, sadly, that's far from the case. That first run-in with the Nemesis is not only more scripted than it first appears, but basically a one-off set-piece in disguise. And for the remainder of the game the creature is promptly relegated to cutscenes and pedestrian boss battles, which is deeply disappointing. All the dread built up by that first encounter quickly dissipates.

This is a remake of *Resident Evil 3* in the loosest sense

DEAD WRONG

Replay that initial meeting with it, and you'll notice that the Nemesis always appears in the same places at the same time, which swiftly shatters the illusion that this is an intelligent killing machine with a mind of its own. It feels like it's always one step ahead of you because it literally is, set to spawn when you reach certain parts of the level. Every time you approach a certain gate, it appears at the top of it – even if it was way behind you just a moment before – which just feels disappointingly clumsy. I wasn't expecting *Alien: Isolation* levels of reactive AI from *Resident Evil 3*, but I'd have liked at least *something* to chew on. It's frustratingly half-baked and so, unfortunately, is the rest of *Resident Evil 3*.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A loose remake of *Resident Evil 3*

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
1-5

LINK
residentevil.com

The streets of Raccoon City have a very different feel from the claustrophobic corridors, polished floors, creepy statues and grand hallways of *Resident Evil 2*'s police station. There are a handful of larger, more open spaces here, connected by alleyways, apartment blocks and sewer tunnels. The city is illuminated by an explosion of neon signs, which make it feel more like Las Vegas than small-town America, but it looks cool. I like that I occasionally find myself using the larger space to reposition zombies, luring them down one staircase to escape up another.

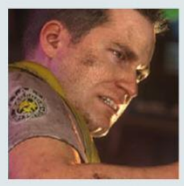
Raccoon City is a nice change of scenery, but it's short-lived. Later environments are dingy and artistically uninspired – particularly the Spencer Memorial Hospital, a location you visit towards the end of the game. Compared to the visually striking, architecturally rich RPD building, this maze of samey corridors and wards is totally forgettable. There's no interesting backstory to uncover, no arcane puzzles to get your head around, no eccentric survivors to meet. And it's somehow less interesting to look at than the hospital in the original game.

Speaking of which, this is a remake of *Resident Evil 3* only in the loosest possible sense. The plot, locations, and characters are vaguely similar, but it's a departure in so many other respects that it might as well have been an entirely new game. Whole locations are missing, including the clock tower, even though its exterior features in a scene. And those sections where the action stops and you have to make story-altering decisions have been cut entirely. I could list more things that didn't make the cut, including the Grave Digger boss, but I'd soon run out of space. It's a shame to see all this left out, especially after the *Resident Evil 2* remake strived to include so much.

FRIENDLY FIRE *A few of the survivors you'll meet*

DARIO ROSSO
Jill bumps into this paranoid salesman early in the game. Convinced she's infected, he locks himself away in the back of a truck rather than asking for her help, which probably wasn't the smartest move.

MIKHAIL VIKTOR
A senior member of the Umbrella Biohazard Countermeasure Service, or U.B.C.S. After the collapse of the Soviet Union he found success as a mercenary, and work at Umbrella soon followed.

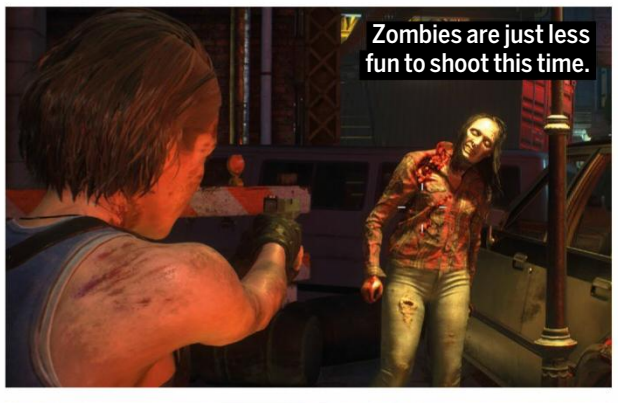


BRAD VICKERS
A member of the Raccoon City Police Department's elite S.T.A.R.S. unit, Brad is a colleague of Jill Valentine. He survived the Mansion Incident in the first *Resident Evil* game, and now the Nemesis is after him.

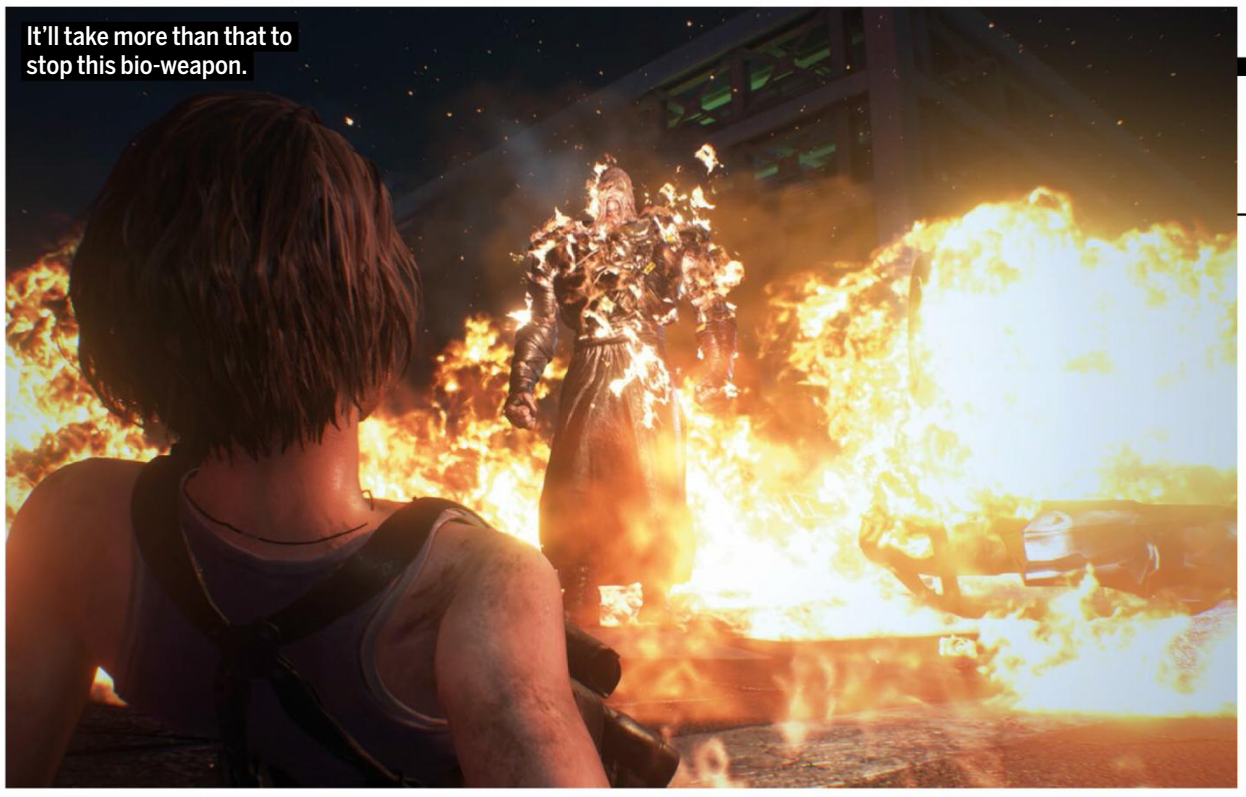
NICHOLAI GINOVAEF
Another U.B.C.S. member, but a less agreeable one than Mikhail. From the moment you meet him, it's clear he's only out for himself. Jill doesn't trust him, but is forced to form an uneasy alliance.

The Nemesis' hideous new look is a winner, at least.

You get to use new weapons, but they feel limp to fire.


Zombies are just less fun to shoot this time.

Character animation is top notch, but the story's weak.


It'll take more than that to stop this bio-weapon.

Fights with the Nemesis are heavily scripted.

Two playable characters, but only one campaign.

Despite the evocative setting, environments are dull.

Hunters are more grotesque than ever – but not that threatening.

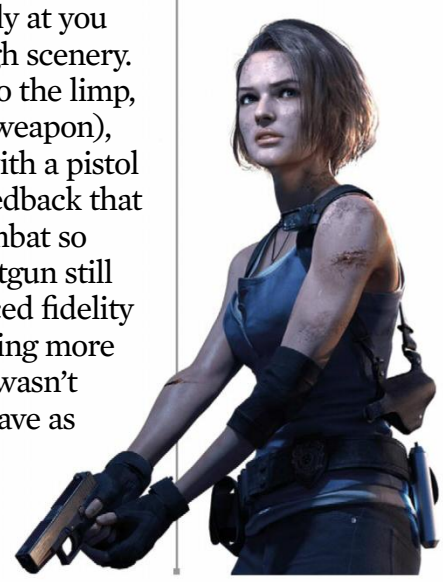
FLAT PLANS

Resident Evil is best when you're lost in a complex, labyrinthine space, forced to make a mental map as you play, unlocking more of the sprawl by solving puzzles and finding curiously located keys. But *Resident Evil 3* has hardly any of this, and is actually stiflingly linear. You're frequently funnelled down a prescribed path to the next cutscene, and it doesn't help that the story is lean to the point of nonexistence, with one-dimensional characters and a narrative through-line so flimsy I kept forgetting what I was doing or why.

I do like the way it connects to *Resident Evil 2*, though. The story takes place 24 hours before Leon and Claire arrive in Raccoon City, and you'll witness events that provide additional backstory to stuff you saw in the previous game – including how Marvin ended up bleeding all over the lobby of the police station. There are a few fun set-pieces in here too, including a fraught, chaotic siege straight out of a classic zombie movie, and a darkly hilarious homage to Raiders of the Lost Ark's boulder chase scene. There are definitely sparks of creativity here, even if they're few and far between.

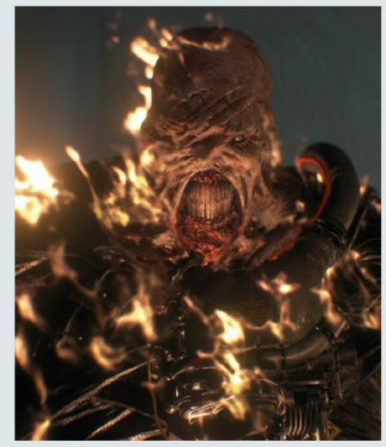
But man, what happened to the combat? One of the most surprising things about the *Resident Evil 2* remake was how it made slow, shambling zombies exciting again. Its undead were brilliantly physical and clumsy, tripping over each other, tumbling down stairs, flopping into comical ragdoll heaps. But here they seem strangely disconnected from their surroundings, and shooting them just doesn't feel as satisfying. It's like the physics that govern them have been severely simplified, or removed altogether. Even the Hunters are underwhelming, having been transformed into giant crab-like creatures that leap clumsily at you and constantly clip through scenery.

Zombies hardly react to the limp, rattly assault rifle (a new weapon), and even popping them with a pistol has less of the crunchy feedback that made *Resident Evil 2*'s combat so enjoyable. At least the shotgun still packs a punch. This reduced fidelity may be a trade-off for having more zombies on screen, but it wasn't worth it. You don't even have as many ways to deal with them, thanks to the removal of the system from *Resident Evil 2* where you board up windows with planks of wood to manage the flow. Why does a high profile sequel like this have *less* in it? It's baffling.



TYRANT VS NEMESIS *Battle of the bastards*

TYRANT	NEMESIS
Unpredictable	Heavily scripted
Never speaks	Groans a lot
Slow and lumbering	Terrifyingly fast
Prefers his fists	Can use weapons
No tentacles	Has tentacles
Nice hat	No hat



CORPSE RUN

There are two playable characters, but only one campaign, and there's no real difference between Carlos and Jill besides the weapons they use. There's no Mercenaries or equivalent. No New Game+ mode. It's an incredibly slight package, and the bundled 4v1 multiplayer mode Resistance – where a player-controlled 'mastermind' lays traps for three other players – isn't good enough to make this worth £50, with stripped-back combat, cramped maps, and repetitive objectives. It's even less replayable than *Resident Evil 2* thanks to lack of a remixed alternate campaign, and how heavily scripted the Nemesis sections are. I'll probably never play it again.

And before you know it, it's all over. *Resident Evil 3* rarely gives you a chance to soak anything in before it fast-tracks you to the next story beat. There's nothing wrong with a short game, but the pacing here feels off, like it's hurriedly shoving you to the next location just as you're starting to get comfortable – and before its ideas get a chance to fully form.

It's ultimately an extremely shallow game, with lavish production values failing to mask just how rushed and unambitious it feels. This is undeniably a handsome game, at least technically, with detailed, expressive character models and superb lighting throughout. And it plays great on PC too, benefiting from the added precision of being able to aim with the mouse.

After the imaginative, tradition-defying *Resident Evil 7*, and the sublimely polished, satisfying *Resident Evil 2*, this is a massive leap backwards for the series. The Nemesis is wasted – a bit-part player in its own game, neutered by its chronic lack of purpose. There are barely any puzzles and you're rarely given the chance to wander off the beaten path. At one point Carlos visits the police station of *Resident Evil 2*, but you're confined to one tiny section of it, which only highlights just how limited the exploration in this game is. After this section, I just wanted to replay the *Resident Evil 2* remake.

> ***Resident Evil 3* rarely gives you a chance to soak anything in**

Resident Evil 3 is essentially a chain of action set-pieces, threaded together with a paper-thin story and too many cutscenes. This is the direction the series started to take post-*Resident Evil 4*, when it seriously lost its way and we ended up with the abysmal *Resident Evil 6*, and I'd hate to see that happen again. I still believe in *Resident Evil*, and I'm eager for more remakes, but if Capcom falls into the trap of bashing out a lesser game every year, people will lose faith in the series again. Maybe they could develop a remake of *this* remake a few years down the line? Then the Nemesis might finally get the game it deserves. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Both the Nemesis and Raccoon City are massively underused in this disappointing step back for the series.

58

DULLED

BLEEDING EDGE doesn't do enough to stand out. *By Morgan Park*

While *Bleeding Edge* may be a 4v4 'brawler', don't take that to mean that it plays like Ninja Theory's *DmC*. Instead, it's a game of timing, positioning, and cooldown management. But without a complex meta or satisfying combat, it whiffs on the '*Overwatch*-but-melee' promise. Whereas Blizzard's shooter ends each match with highlights, I'm yet to see a highlight-worthy feat of skill or teamwork here.

I thought I'd be feeling hero fatigue at this point, but I do really love the backstories of *Bleeding Edge*'s 11 fighters. Buttercup is a biker who's basically become a human motorcycle, and Kulev is a 125-year-old professor who achieved immortality by transferring his consciousness to a robotic viper that controls his zombified body. The industrial grunge and absurdity reminds me of *Borderlands*, but *Bleeding Edge* thankfully stops short of the cringey humour.

Every fighter has either a melee or ranged basic attack, three special abilities, and an ultimate. Most abilities don't have to be aimed, so winning fights is all about focusing damage in the right direction while capturing map objectives. A compelling byproduct of *Bleeding Edge*'s focus on melee combat is the importance of verticality and movement as a way to avoid enemies and pick fights. The fighter I've been playing most, ZeroCool, is a support with almost no offensive capability. I'm toast if any enemies gang up on me, so I have to use his double jump to retreat to the high ground when things get hairy. It's fun to make a narrow escape from a bloodthirsty tank, and it's something I couldn't do if this were a shooter.

It'd take an overhaul of the combat to get me back on board

Still, it's a thin layer of planning in what is otherwise a shallow meta. Part of the fun of hero games is theory crafting team compositions and potential counters that enemies won't expect. I haven't seen that potential across *Bleeding Edge*'s roster. Damage fighters feel more or less the same as tanks, but with less health. You can modify your playstyle a bit by equipping mods outside of matches, but the ones I've used so far are just slight boosts to abilities.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hero brawler with MOBA-lite combat and objective modes

EXPECT TO PAY
£25 on Steam; included with Xbox Game Pass

DEVELOPER
Ninja Theory

PUBLISHER
Microsoft

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2060, Ryzen 5 2600 3.4Ghz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
4v4 online

LINK
bleedingedge.com

I can sense faint echoes of *DmC* in Daemon's beautiful sword strikes and Makutu's satisfying uppercut, but the fighting system is more-or-less mashing left-click while waiting for abilities to come off cooldowns. It's no different from a basic right-click attack in a MOBA, but *Bleeding Edge* lacks the deep item building and coordination that adds meaning to fights in *DotA 2*. There's no reason to split up, so every fight is two clashing blobs of colour and particle effects.

CUT UP

Without an expansive metagame or fun combat, *Bleeding Edge* gets boring fast. I can feel my enjoyment waning a few dozen matches in as I've learned the ins and outs of each fighter. Playing with friends on mics is more appealing, but my friend groups are much more likely to gravitate to deeper games with more opportunities for our skills to shine.

The bright side of *Bleeding Edge*'s simplicity is accessibility. New players might have a hard time playing a squishy support that can't fight back, but anyone with a hero game under their belt can read a fighter's description and quickly recognise the role. I can't imagine *Bleeding Edge* becoming anyone's 'main' game when there are lots of games that are more fun, engaging and already have millions of invested players.

It's clear that Ninja Theory has plans to stick with *Bleeding Edge*: the official website already lists a new fighter (a dolphin in a mechanised water tank named Mekko) and art for a new map. I'll be keeping an eye on the game to see what other character designs they cook up, but it'd take an overhaul of the combat to get me back on board. Barring that, I'm not hopeful for its future. ■

ROLE CALL *Bleeding Edge ticks off all the hero game archetypes*

BUTTERCUP
The one that has a chain
You can't have a MOBA-like game without a hero that can hook foes and reel them in.

ZEROCOOL
The one with a healing beam
Just keep that laser pointed vaguely in the direction of your mates to keep them alive.

DAEMON
The invisible assassin
The annoying sword bastard that you can't see until he's already stabbing you.

MAEVE
The one that stops you moving
Maeve traps you in a cage just long enough for you to get pummelled by all her friends.

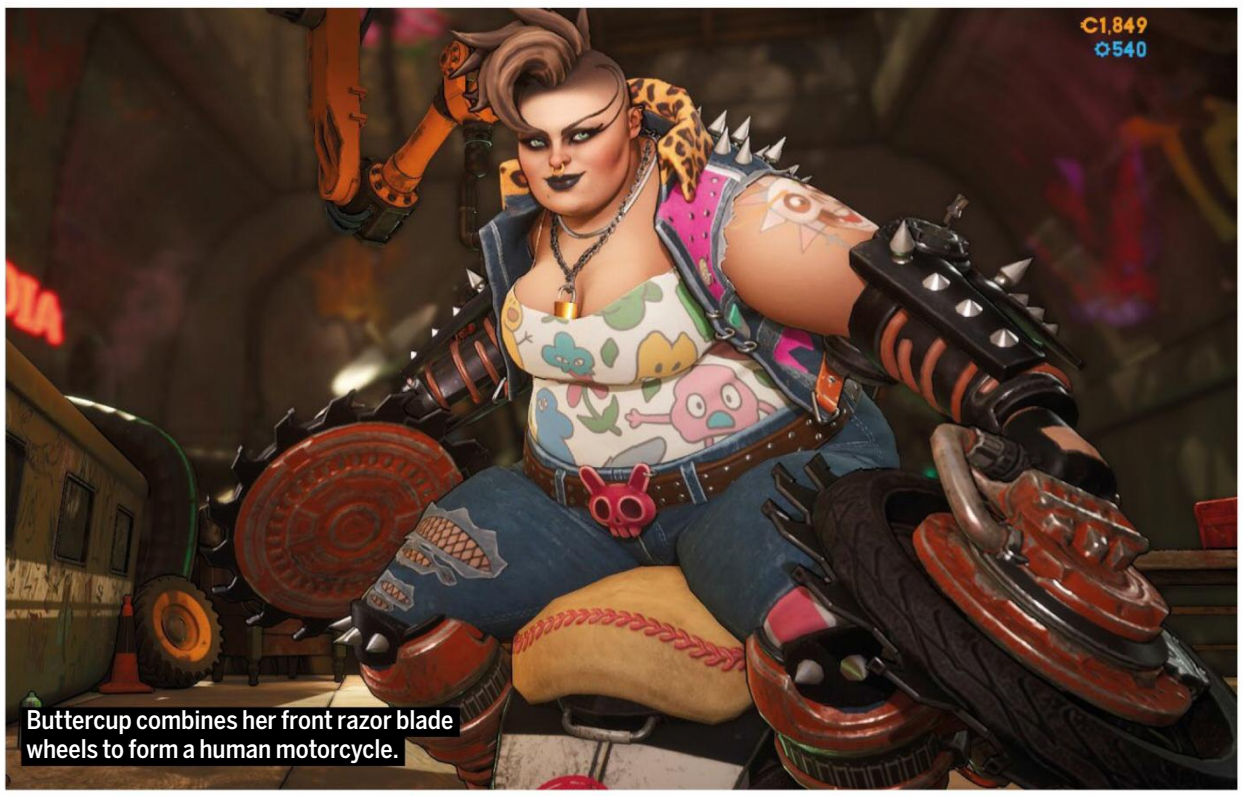
MAKUTU
Wait, that's just Lúcio, isn't it?
Here's a crazy idea, what if there was a support hero with both a healing and speed buff?

PC GAMER VERDICT

58

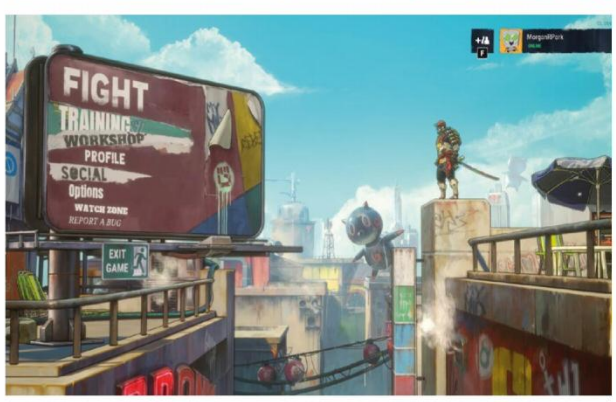
***Bleeding Edge*'s characters are cool and, ahem, edgy, but the combat is too shallow to hold attention for long.**

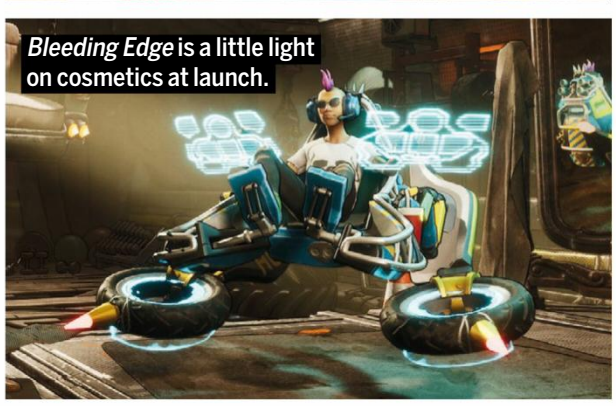
Three versus one – that's really bad odds.



Buttercup combines her front razor blade wheels to form a human motorcycle.

Excellent form from Makutu.




Bleeding Edge is a little light on cosmetics at launch.

ZeroCool is *Bleeding Edge*'s strongest healer, but weakest fighter.

DEEP DIVE

IN OTHER WATERS lets you explore a beautiful and mysterious alien ocean. ***By Rachel Watts***

The way that *In Other Waters* imagines humanity's first encounter with alien lifeforms is a bit different from other sci-fi stories. Beneath the waves of the planet Gliese 667Cc is a thriving eco-system brimming with strange alien lifeforms. The vivid descriptions of a scientist and a minimalistic computer interface tell a story of awe and trepidation, creating a serene underwater adventure like no other.

You play as the AI of an exo-suit piloted by xenobiologist Ellery Vas, a scientist who has come to Gliese 667Cc to study the alien lifeforms of this uncharted ocean. These strange beings aren't the only mystery though, Ellery is also trying to solve the disappearance of her fellow scientist, Minae Nomura. The story follows Ellery as she traces her lost colleague's footsteps through the depths of this alien ocean, trying to understand what Minae was studying in secret.

You assist Ellery as she navigates the underwater landscape of this new world through a computer interface. The circle in the middle of the UI displays a sleek, minimalistic map of your surroundings covered in many lines, dots and symbols. You scan your surroundings and then decide where Ellery is going to move to, with her taking notes and making observations about the ecology and geography as you go.

Ellery's vivid descriptions of your surroundings are your only way of making sense of the world, bringing those lines and symbols to life. Where I only see jagged lines on the interface's sleek design, Ellery says that we are standing on the edge of a vast underwater reef teeming with life. Until her description, the symbols and lines around us are a mystery. It's a vulnerable feeling, having to rely on her to be my eyes, even though she's the flesh and blood my circuits are meant to protect. The dynamic gave me a sense of responsibility to her and her endeavour, fuelling my motivation to explore even deeper.

The sound design reinforces the word-built world

In the same vein as old text adventure games, these descriptions build a strong mental picture of this world's alien ecosystem. Along with her visual descriptions, Ellery logs the species' behaviours and gives observations and educated guesses about how they fit into the larger ecosystem. The writing is so vivid it feels like I'm learning about a real ecosystem. The 'singing' of underwater sea stalks could be a communication system, Ellery says, and their growth pattern implies a complex territorial network. You get the sense that a lot of research has gone into making this otherworldly ecosystem as believable as possible.

The sound design reinforces the word-built world: creatures chirp when they speed past you, acid clouds fizzle as they gnaw at the underwater suit. As you go deeper into a cavern the soundscape adjusts to a deeper timbre, pulling you into the depths. Together with the bleeps and bloops of the interface and Amos Roddy's warm synth soundtrack, it creates a rich alien soundscape.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sci-adventure where you navigate an alien ocean through a computer interface

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
Jump Over The Age

PUBLISHER
Fellow Traveller

REVIEWED ON
i5-2500K, 8GB RAM, GTX 670

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
jumpovertheage.com

REEF ENCOUNTER

Ellery isn't here on holiday, though, and research is always at the forefront of her mind. Part of the interface allows you to take small samples from the flora and fauna you come across. At the research base, you can analyse them in the laboratory and the data is added to your alien encyclopaedia.

Your inventory of organic samples can also be cleverly used as resources on your expeditions. Some can give you an oxygen boost and others can even influence the world, such as by making a bunch of alien stalks retract to clear the way through a cavern.

In Other Waters pulled me through fields of alien fauna, caverns filled with acid pools, through powerful currents that could sweep me away, and to the dark depths of the ocean's lower floors. It captures both the beauty and terror of the ocean. *In Other Waters* had me spellbound until the end. ■

BACK TO SCHOOL

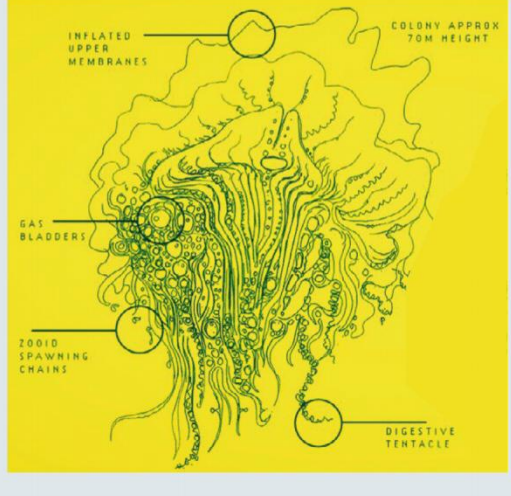
Here's a lesson from the xenobiologist Ellery Vas about the Singstalk species

1 Singstalks are tall fungal stalks that can be found in the central reef.

2 These forests communicate through sonic sounds and move against each other to create a harmonic hum.

3 Singstalks are comprised of lots of spirally-entwined stalks that weave together to create a thick 'trunk'.

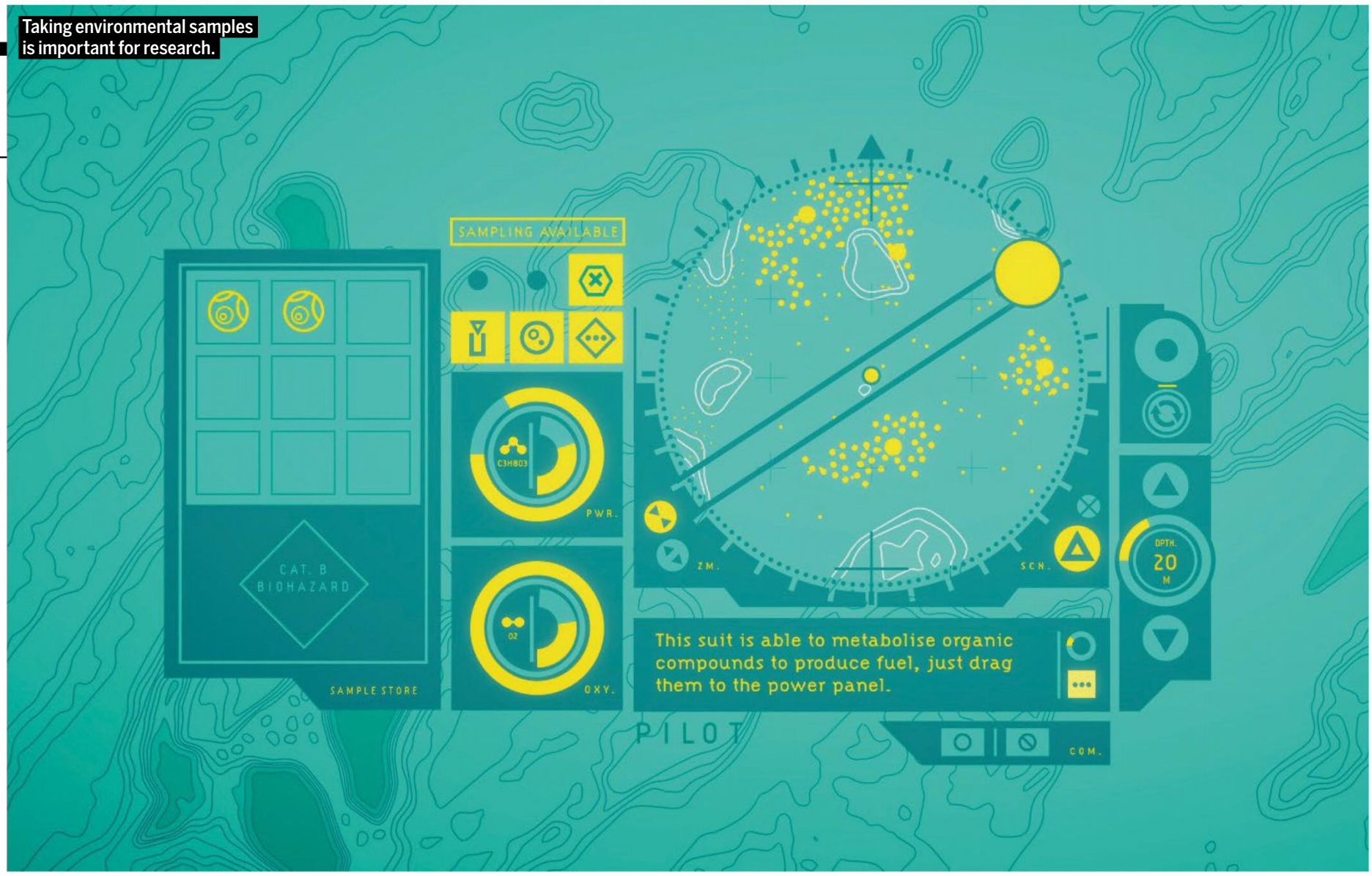
4 Groups of these stalk forests can be used to slow down fast currents, controlling the flow of water through caverns.



PC GAMER VERDICT

In Other Waters is a serene sci-fi story that will have you thinking about more than what lies beneath the waves.

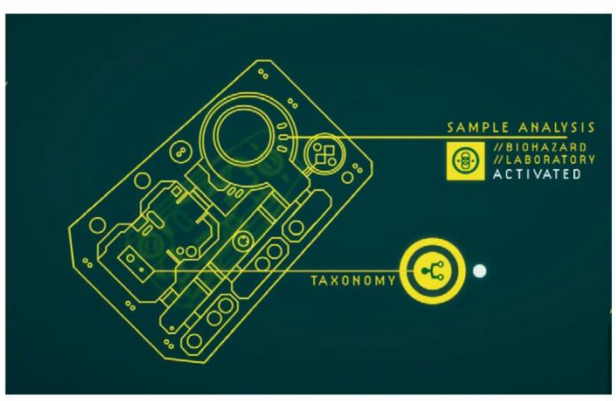
80



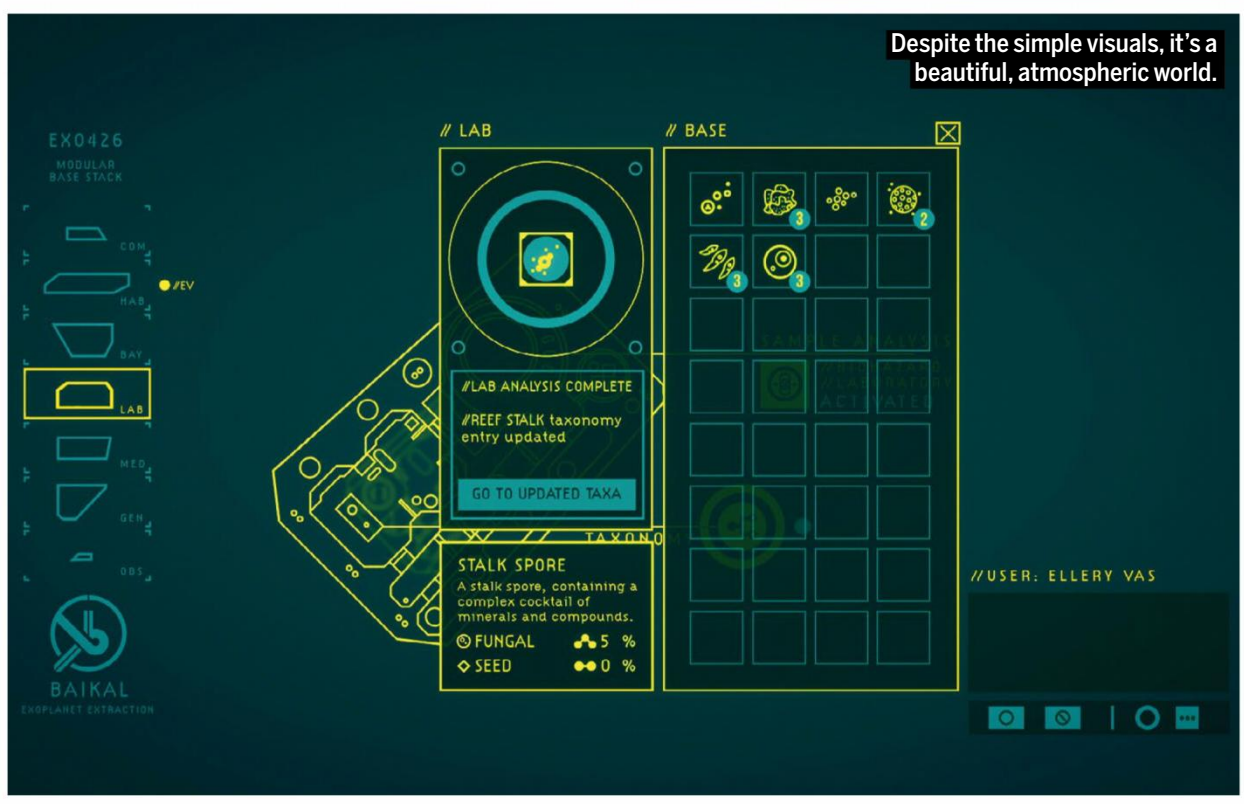
Taking environmental samples is important for research.

There are lots of secrets at the bottom of the ocean.

The story will take you to the deepest caverns.



These acidic pools are teeming with little creatures.



Despite the simple visuals, it's a beautiful, atmospheric world.

LIVE LIKE A KING

Look after peasants and lords in monarch-'em-up YES, YOUR GRACE. *By Luke Kemp*

Somebody clearly took a look at the choice-driven adventure genre, and said, "Can I king it?" Yes, you can! You see, while *Reigns* seems like a logical reference point – you play as a king, making various decisions that affect both your subjects and members of the nobility – Brave At Night's game delivers a meatier, more traditional gaming experience. While this allows me to become invested at times, it comes at a cost to the central idea of choice.

To begin with, it's all pretty straightforward. Entertaining lords and smelly peasants alike in the throne room, I listen to their wants and needs, and decide whether I feel like improving their dull lives. It's not quite as simple as that, of course. I only have a limited supply of gold, and the ominously generic, Soylent Green-y sounding 'Supplies'. But as time goes on, I find that I have the need to build up my army and make some allies.

It's literally impossible to bring every lord and king onside. Their desires and interests conflict, meaning I need to choose who to woo – and I find myself caring enough about this kingdom to have my conscience guide me. But let's rewind a little. I'm soon introduced to my wife and my three beautiful pixelated daughters. The family dynamic is strong and believable enough to ensure that, right until the end, I find myself always doing what I believe is right for each of them. *However*. The vital decision of whether or not to marry off one of my daughters is made for me (technically, twice) which, for me, deals a blow to the idea that my actions have important consequences in this new world.

There are two major battles, each of which you get plenty of notice for

I'm warned that supplicants won't always be honest with me, or their true natures won't be clear. While it's often obvious when this is the case, or the consequences of being fooled are negligible, there are a few exceptions. I felt genuinely bad, for example, when it was revealed that an ally I had helped to boost my army beat up his wife.

OH MY LORD

The idea seems to be that, as you can't please everybody, you have to decide who to help and then hope that you made the right choice. Most of the time though, it doesn't work like that, because you ordinarily only speak to one person at a time in the throne room – and you have to make a decision before seeing the next person. There's no indication of what each person might want before you speak to them, either. Once, I sent my general to investigate something for a villager, only to find that the next person in line also needed my general. Given the choice – which I wasn't – I definitely would have helped the second person.

There are two major battles, each of which you get plenty of notice for. Although you issue orders and make decisions during these, your impact at the time is minimal, and how well (or badly) you do is in effect decided before the big day. This, for me, is the most interesting element of the game. The first battle, I survived by the skin of my blocky teeth with just two soldiers remaining. I think this is partly because, during the weeks of preparation, I dedicated resources more to looking after my subjects than on elements to help me fight the enemy. When the second battle appeared on the horizon, I withheld all of my gold and most of my supplies for war preparations. That battle didn't go great, *but*, I was simultaneously shocked and relieved to learn that I had prevented a few major characters from dying. Again, this game made me care.

I don't have the level of control over events that I'd like (or that I feel I've been promised). Still, the story is strong and memorable, and throughout I am made to feel a part of the kingdom of Davern, which ensures I try to be a good king, rather than being somebody disinterestedly clicking dialogue options in a videogame. It is this firing up of emotions that is the game's crowning achievement. (Sorry.) ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The perfect game for anybody who likes to boss people around and pretend they're rich

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Brave At Night

PUBLISHER
No More Robots

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

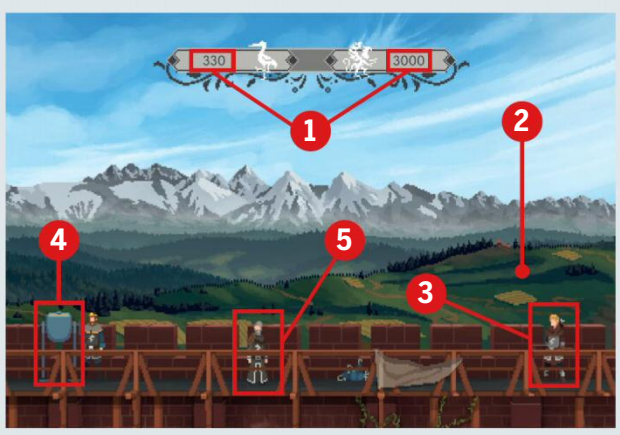
LINK
braveatnight.co.uk

BATTLEFIELD 1243 *The fights of* Yes, Your Grace

1 I'm, erm, a little outnumbered.

2 It's much prettier before the legions of men out for blood arrive.

3 He's not my only archer! I have... three.



4 Thanks to splashing cash beforehand, I have boiling oil to defend the wall.

5 My advisor. Not sure why he bothered turning up.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Despite *Yes, Your Grace*'s variable success with the element of choice, this is a kingdom that you'll want to save.

72

Ah, a writer's life.

Those little red dots want to kill you.

Explore the area for resources.

Because I'm nice like that.

Green for an optional event, blue for a compulsory one.

LAB RAT

THE COMPLEX is a visually impressive, but unambitious, live-action adventure. ***By Andy Kelly***

In the very near future, a woman on the London Underground coughs up blood and is rushed to a facility its employees refer to simply as The Complex. Her body has been invaded by nanocells, an advanced technology with the potential to revolutionise medical science, if only its creators – and our protagonist, Dr Amy Tenant – could sort out that whole coughing up blood thing.

Four years ago, Tenant worked as a warzone medic in a fictional totalitarian state called Kindar. With talk of a supreme leader and references to human rights violations, it's not difficult to identify which country inspired the game's writer, Lynn Renee Maxcy, who was a writer for TV series The Handmaid's Tale.

Now Tenant is with Kensington Corp, a British biotech company who has hired interns from war-torn Kindar to help with the nanocell project – one of which we learn was the blood-spewing girl on the tube. Figuring out why this happened, and how the nanocells escaped the lab, is the first mystery you have to solve as Tenant, a suspiciously young Canadian scientist. But the story soon grows more, well, complex.

The Complex is an interactive movie, and I don't use that in the pejorative sense – it's literally what it is. You sit and you watch a series of events unfold, occasionally making decisions that alter the course the story takes. Sometimes your decisions have a major impact; sometimes they barely change anything. It's the most basic kind of branching interactive narrative, but with the production values of a TV drama.

Her being Scottish, she wears tartan trousers and drinks whiskey

DEEP TROUBLE

Decisions are timed, which you'd expect from a game like this. But the baffling thing about *The Complex* is that they're timed even when what's happening on-screen isn't particularly time sensitive. Timed decisions in narrative games work well when you're forced into tense life-or-death situations, not when you're deciding which person in the lab to help you lift a box.

I won't say how, but not long into the story, Tenant and Dr Rees Wakefield, a former colleague she worked with in Kindar, and with whom she has a tense relationship, end up trapped in the depths of the complex. With gun-toting men at the door and a dwindling supply of air, the pair have to find a way to stay alive – supported by other characters including Kensington Corp's founder, Nathalie Kensington.

Character actor Kate Dickie, who plays Kensington, is probably the biggest name in the cast. Even if you don't recognise the name you'll have seen her in *something*, whether it's Game of Thrones, Prometheus or The Last Jedi. She does a fine job, although it says everything about how subtle *The Complex* is that, her being Scottish, she wears tartan trousers and can be found drinking whisky in just about every scene.

Michelle Mylett, who plays Tenant, handles the lead role well, even if I did find her a little too young and clean-cut to convincingly portray a battle-hardened biochemist.

The Complex is strongest in the second act, when Tenant and Wakefield are looking for ways to escape the lab. But the relatively careful pacing of these scenes is tossed aside towards the end, as the story suddenly charges towards one of the game's multiple endings. I saw four of eight, and I was impressed by how different they all were. It's even possible to get absolutely everyone killed, with an achievement as a reward for your efforts.

The Complex is technically polished, with seamless transitions between scenes and beautiful-looking HD video. The sets, lighting, and costumes are great throughout, and the cast (mostly) does a solid job with the uneven script. I also appreciate being able to skip previously viewed scenes when replaying, which lets you see the other endings without having to sit through the same stuff over and over again. But the limited interaction and forgettable story ultimately let the game down. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A live-action adventure game set in a locked-down lab

EXPECT TO PAY
£10

DEVELOPER
Good Gate Media, Little Jade Productions

PUBLISHER
Wales Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
walesinteractive.com/thecomplex

PC GAMER VERDICT

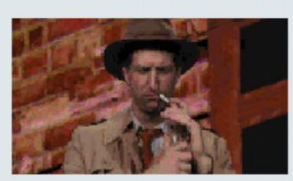
A polished but disappointingly by-the-numbers FMV game that won't linger in your mind for long.

52

VIDEO OUT *Better FMV games you should play*

HER STORY
This sees you searching through an archive of interview clips, piecing together a crime as you go. But your version of the truth depends on which order you find them in.

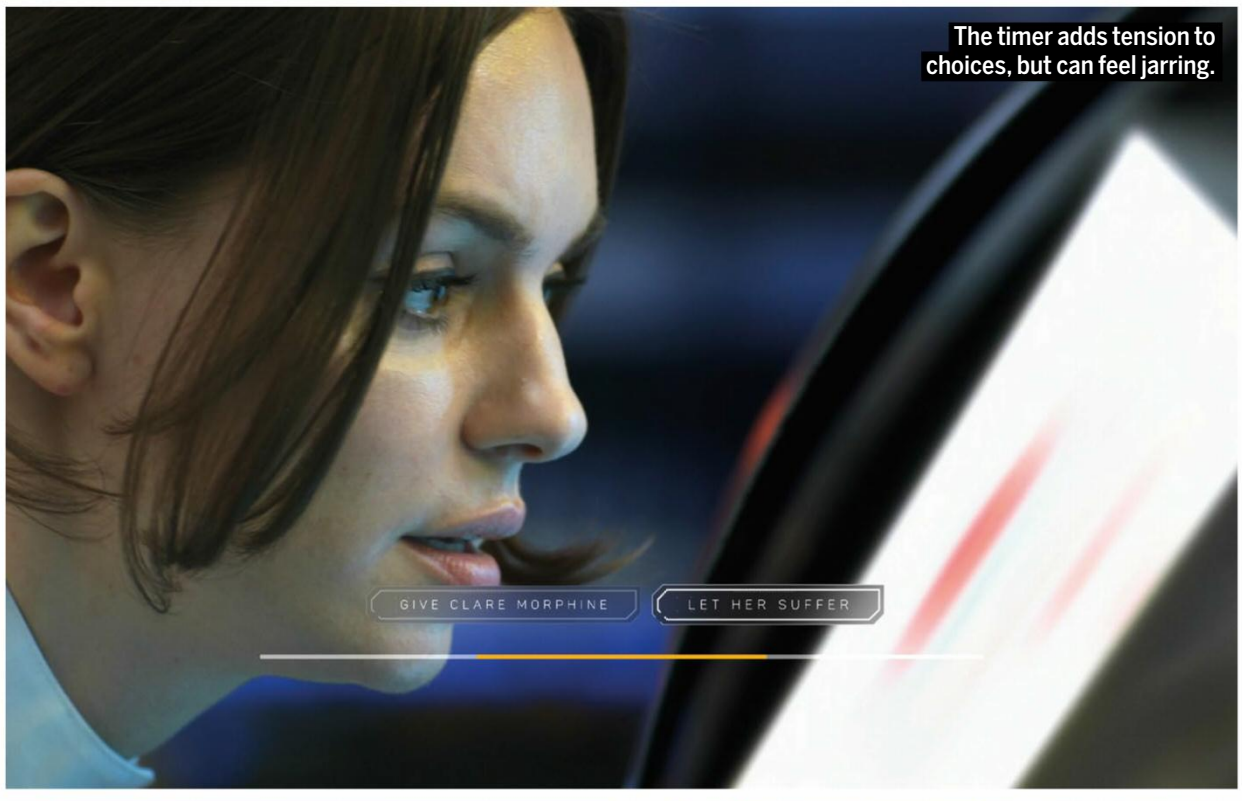
STAR TREK: BORG
An interactive episode of Star Trek, filmed on the proper sets and everything. Thanks to the presence of Q, it plays around with time travel in some interesting ways.



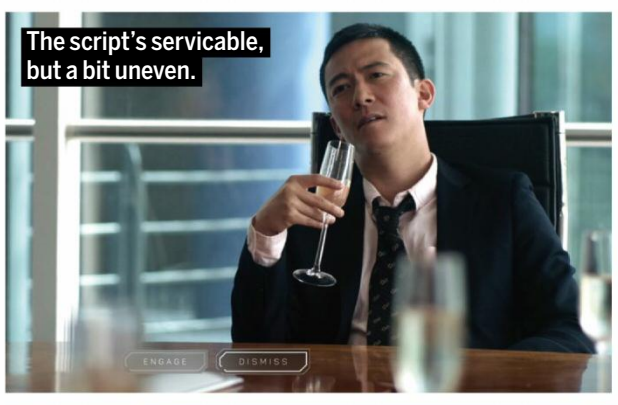
UNDER A KILLING MOON
An old-school adventure game. The moody atmosphere, tongue-in-cheek narration, and campy cinematics make this an FMV classic.

TENDER LOVING CARE
This is not a good game, but it's so damn weird – a slightly porny romantic melodrama starring John Hurt as a psychiatrist – that you have to play it.

Production values are high, but interactivity is lacking.

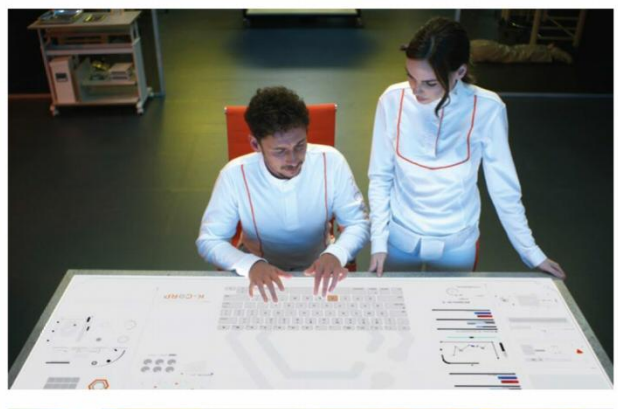


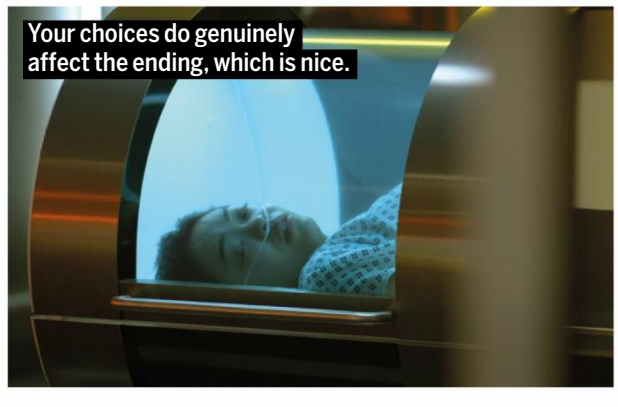
The timer adds tension to choices, but can feel jarring.



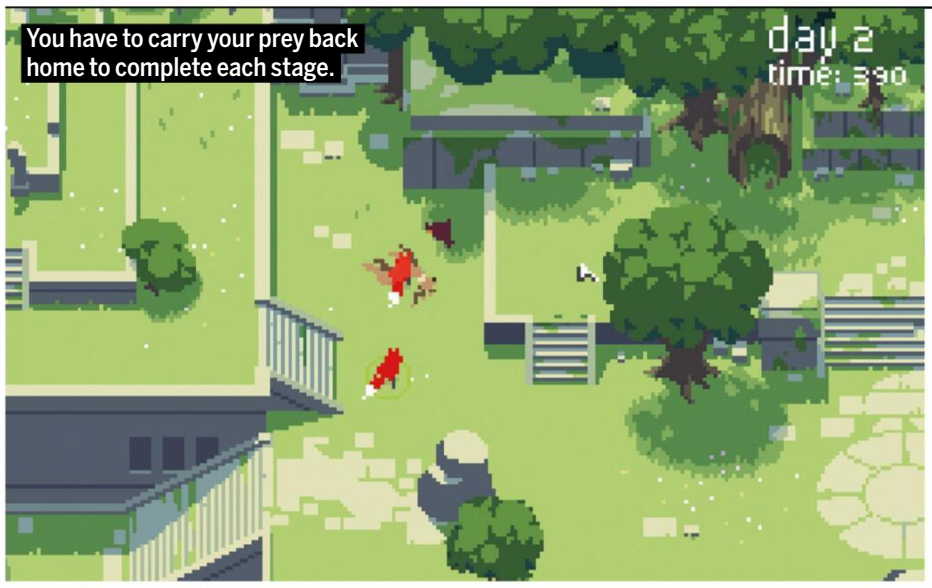
The script's servicable, but a bit uneven.

She played the weird lady with the slightly too clingy son, remember?




Your choices do genuinely affect the ending, which is nice.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes



REVVED UP

The chase is on in foxy hunting game REV

Finally, a hunting simulation with little of the associated squick factor, thanks to you playing as a pack of foxes rather than a murderous human being. In *Rev*, you'll wander around a gorgeous set of woodland ruins, looking for meat that you can drag back to your foxy den.

As meat – according to Wikipedia – tends to come attached to animals, you'll first need to find your prey, stalk it, and then strike. Let's begin with the finding, as it's where you'll spend the, er, meat of the game, scampering about in search of rabbits, deer, and other creatures.

To locate prey in *Rev*, you have to let go of the movement keys. Sitting. Perfectly. Still. Tracks will gradually appear on-screen, glowing as they reveal the multitudinous paths of the woodland critters. It can be somewhat difficult to decipher these, but they do provide a general idea of which direction you need to head in to find your prey.

Great – so you've followed some tracks, and it looks like you've found a deer. Now it's time to creep up, to get very close, and hold the mouse button to charge up an attack. Stay nearby – but not so near that you alert the animal – and your charge will complete, letting you unleash a jumping attack, for hefty damage.

After that, your prey will probably run away, still alive, and you'll need to track them down once more to finish the job. There's a hunting quota you need to meet to clear each stage, as well as a fairly strict time limit, but you'll get to know the layout of the sizeable ruins as you return to them, with altered creature layouts, for each new level. As the game progresses, you may even remember your foxy pals and put them to use.

This is a gorgeous game, even with the violence and sense of guilt

You can switch between foxes, having them tag along for support, or leave them in advantageous positions, to surprise any creature you send their way. The latter option works well enough, with the AI acting serviceably, although it's far less good when it comes to pathfinding and following you around. Mostly, as I cleared the stages, I forgot about the other foxes. I hardly needed them as, bizarrely, you cannot die.

Take too much damage from your defending prey and, well, nothing happens. You can take as much hurt as you like. The penalty is time lost, and perhaps your prey scarpering away, but, with no sense of fragility to the foxes, the desperate nature of the animal kingdom doesn't really come across that much here.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A top-down hunting game where you play as a band of foxes

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Faxdoc, NostalgiaTree

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/RevHunt

PIXEL PERFECT

What you do have here is beauty. This is a gorgeous game, even with the violence, and the slight sense of guilt that comes as you tear an animal from its pack. The beauty is in the pixel art, but it's also in the animation, in the serenely flowing water and the animals that scamper, lifelike, around this dappled woodland. As a simulation it's pretty lacking, but *Rev* melds an interesting combat system with a world you'll dearly want to explore. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

While I found it to be lacking a little in depth, the beautiful *Rev* offers a fresh take on the hunting game genre.

74

POINTY BLEND

Stick it with the POINTY END

Positioning is everything in this clever blend of roguelike and puzzler, where you play as a helmet with a spiky shotgun attached. Every time you move from one tile to another, you twist your log-like body, either rolling across the ground horizontally, standing on end, or falling down.

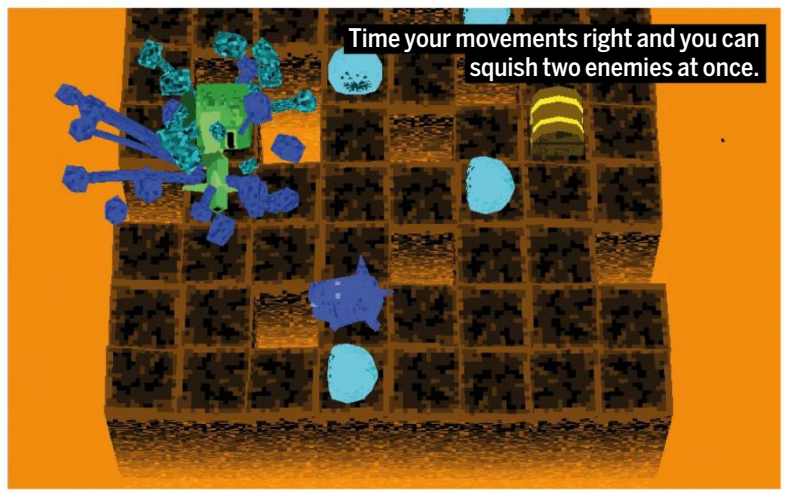
The exact nature of the move matters hugely, as you'll either deal damage, or leave yourself open to attack, depending on your position and facing. If you fall onto an enemy, or it makes contact with your spiky end, said enemy will perish. You also have a few shells, for a ranged attack. But when you're tipped over onto the ground, you're vulnerable to enemies. So you'll need to roll away, or stand upright as soon as you're able.

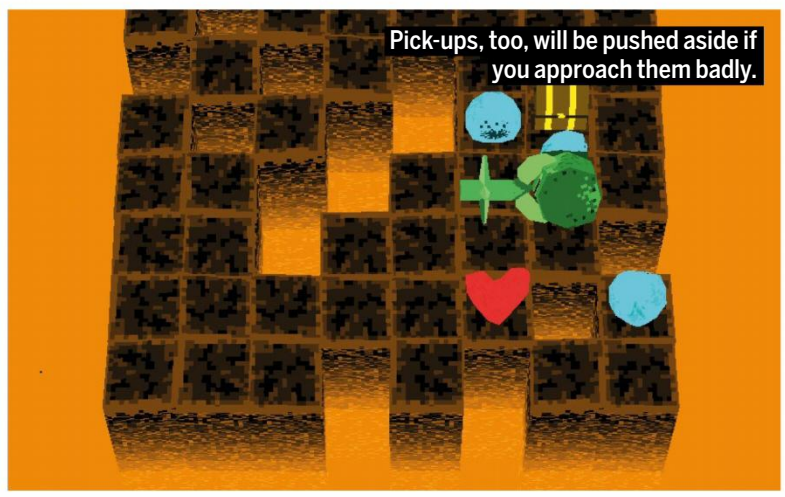
With its focus on tactical movement, this reminds me a little of *Stephen's Sausage Roll*. It's similarly turn-based, but with randomised levels populated by colourful creatures and holes in the ground. These are interesting, as you can push enemies into pits, while you're usually long enough to pass over them. There's a lot of strategy packed into each compact level.

More than many roguelikes, you'll need to plan out every movement if you're hopeful of succeeding, as there's little margin for error. It's here where *Pointy End* feels like a puzzle game, but one where you're discouraged from experimenting, as failure means starting the game again.

If there's a slight disconnect, then, between *Pointy End*'s two sides, that's a fair side effect of the innovation that has obviously gone into it. You won't spend *serious* time on it, but it's a thoughtful novelty that makes you chew over every tiny movement you make. ■

77


Time your movements right and you can squish two enemies at once.


Pick-ups, too, will be pushed aside if you approach them badly.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Ian MacLarty	ianmaclarty.itch.io

SPAM, A LOT

Invade people's privacy in PANCOMOS

Spare a thought for the individuals who have to sort through your incoming email, opening it to check whether it's legitimate, bursting with malware, or simply spam. It might sound like a gross violation of privacy, but it's the premise of *PanComOS*, which imagines that humans are paid to categorise your emails, rather than some faceless algorithm.

Playing out like a trauma-free *Papers, Please*, *PanComOS* is a game that invites you to make seemingly simple decisions, as you drag emails into either the 'Send' or 'Trash' folders on a desktop. Of course, you know what spam looks like: it's a grammatically suspect plea for money. And those emails are pretty easy to spot.

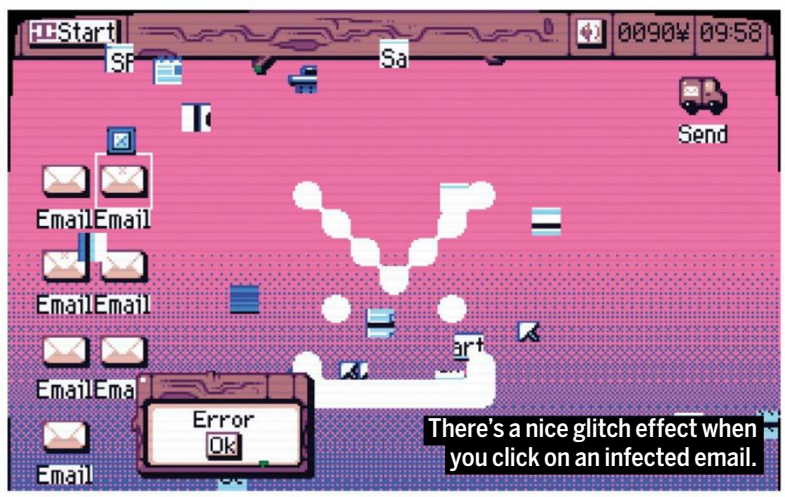
But, as the game gradually insists, you now have to whitelist certain email addresses, and (weirdly) to watch out for extra-terrestrials, and to scan thumbnails for the signs of malware. But, where *PanComOS* begins to shine is with its subtle moments of moral deliberation.

Reading an email by a drug addict seeking to feed their habit, you might wonder whether it would be better to drop this email into 'spam', rather than sending it on to their gullible doctor. The game was *almost* onto something with these few ethically charged moments, when I realised it has no ending: the last wave of emails just repeats, until you finally quit.

There's no real pay-off for your decisions, other than momentary payouts or fines, out of a pot of money you can use to purchase visual themes. It's a bit disappointing, and there's no way around that, but I reckon this well-written, funny game is still worth a play. And I'd love a bigger version that made more of its ethically dodgy core. ■

62

You can customise your desktop by spending in-game cash.



There's a nice glitch effect when you click on an infected email.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Hyohnoo	hyohnoo.itch.io

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

Kothug had always been scared of optometrists.

A moment of joy before Talion's world turns to sewage.

URUK HIGH

Why it's still impossible to get anything done in MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

I didn't want it to happen like this. I intended to focus on the story. But, instead, a few hours into a new game, I'm chasing a creature called Kothug Maggot-Nest around a slag heap as revenge for laughing at me when I died. If the orcs in Peter Jackson's trilogy felt this good to kill the extended cuts would just be nine hours of uruk butchery tutorials led by Aragorn and chums.

It's a measure of both my feeble self-control and the enduring excellence of *Shadow of Mordor*. I feel more like a round dog in a sausage shop than a steely Gondorian ranger out for revenge. It's literally impossible for me to stay on target, and I mean that in a good way.

The brutal intro is enough to make me want to kill every orc in the Black Lands, but then the game makes things worse by teasing me with bonus quests. Of *course* I want to hunt down the captain who killed Phil from PC Gamer six years ago. He might have forgotten, but Talion hasn't. And there's something especially delightful about a deathless prick Ranger and his wraith buddy ruining what little fun there is to be had in Mordor. Planning a duel? A trial by combat? A quiet game of Ludo with Mugrot Filth-Licker? Not on my watch. Talion is the tale orc mums tell their children to make them eat their maggoty crusts.

It's literally impossible for me to stay on target... in a good way

The size and structure of the landscape helps keep things immediate. It's one of those open worlds that feels big enough to be impressive, but tight enough to traverse quickly. It recalls *Yakuza*'s Kamuroucho, but with the neon signs swapped out for bare rock and bile. But it's the actual physical process of playing that I can lose hours to. I adore the feeling of sauntering up to a dense Wetherspoon of orcs – that's the collective noun – before dancing between them in a haze of flashing metal and spilled ichor. It's like a rhythm action game where every success is another lost limb. I also love the slightly clumsy stealth, which speaks to just how dimwitted orcs are. I cheesed one high-level captain by repeatedly disappearing up one of Celebrimbor's spectral towers, which served as inspiration for the connective thread in this month's They're Back.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The final fight of Fellowship played on repeat for ten hours

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Monolith Productions

PUBLISHER
WB Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/2xt30Ef

PETTY RIVALRIES

The hapless uruks might be the most dispatchable enemies in all of gaming. They're so meaty, so objectionable, so utterly *killable* that the thought of clemency never crosses your mind. *Shadow of Mordor*'s orcs exist solely to be unmade. And because of this, the Nemesis system remains a genuine highlight. Petty, emergent rivalries are given a rich sense of purpose. I enjoy the feeling that I can influence the world. When you get killed by some random grunt they rocket up the ranks in a way that almost makes me proud – albeit not proud enough to prevent me hunting him down and returning him to the wretched soil from whence he game. Sleep well, my slimy green patricidal son. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Shadow of Mordor remains a schlocky celebration of trifling, petty rivalries over sweeping drama.

84

AI QUIT

Learning how stupid I am in THE TALOS PRINCIPLE

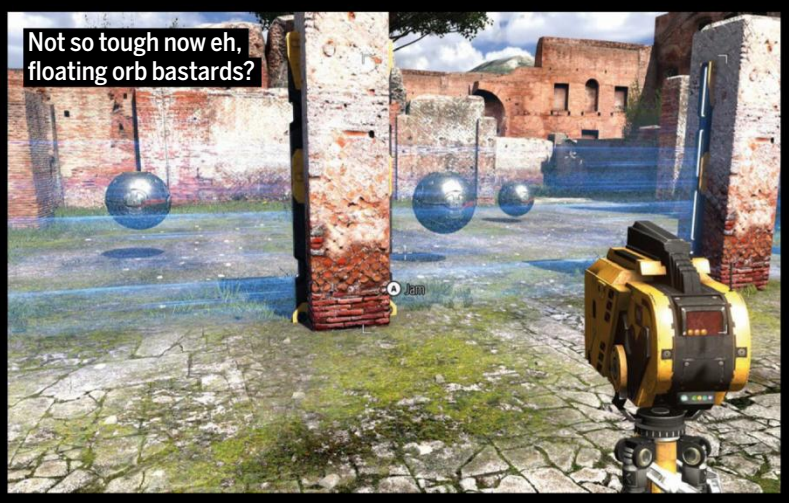
You know that feeling in a skill-based action game, when you feel like you're getting good at something, then you get to the next section and a bigger, badder enemy pummels all the confidence out of you? *The Talos Principle* is like that, but with brainpower. Are we going there? Yeah, we're going there: *It's the* Dark Souls *of thinking*.

That horrible analogy is another way of saying that I can deal with the general, problem-and-solution puzzles that underpin *The Talos Principle*, but that leaves me without the mental capacity to solve the deeper mystery within the game.

There are loads of moments where I feel like I've worked something out through my own endeavour. And I can cheese past some obstacles with logic and by trial and error. But the text-heavy meta-narrative of the game asks deeper questions about the nature of free-will, and they don't have simple answers. You don't get a *Tetris* block for thinking about the nature of existence. It's like a philosophy PhD disguised a puzzle game.

The score below should be enough to tell you that's no bad thing, but also consider it a warning: you'll get the most out of *The Talos Principle* if you're prepared to read lots and consider more. It's smart and self-contained. If you get stuck on one puzzle, you can drift away then come back. I've also awarded five extra points for *The Talos Principle*'s unique method of preventing piracy: there's a lift that takes you up a forbidden tower. But if you've stolen the game it just... stops. This happens far enough into it that you've probably decided you adore the game and intend to finish it. ■

87


Not so tough now eh, floating orb bastards?

The sentry guns were feeling disappointed.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£30	Croteam	Devolver Digital

Ice blocks: the work of the actual devil.

TRICKY TOWERS

When I close my eyes, I can see endless falling blocks. I can see my glorious edifices collapsing as my neighbour's stretch powerfully toward the heavens. And I can feel the absurdly-satisfying 'plunk' of nudging a brick into exactly the right gap. *Tricky Towers* is one of those games that reminds you of your childlike capacity for doing the same thing repeatedly. And it's good enough that it rarely gets boring – the sort of multiplayer game that will turn your work lunchtime into a montage of bricks and debuffs, with brief interludes between rounds for cramming in a sandwich. Who needs to eat when you can watch your neatly-arranged structures fall to ruin? ■

82

It looks so pristine before the insects arrive.

SANCTUM 2

In keeping with this month's theme we've got a tower defence game, albeit a rather horizontal one. *Sanctum 2* blends FPS and multiplayer elements with a classic tower defence structure, as you defend oxygen-producing cores from wave after wave of alien hordes. *Sanctum 2* takes something typically seen as a progression speedbump in most shooters – the obligatory turret section – and turns it into a celebration of planning and positioning. As well as giving you a boots-on-the-ground view of the destruction your automated helpers cause, it imparts the same sense of ammo-diminishing drama as the sentry gun bit in Aliens. Fire in the hole! ■

72

Don't think about where her eyes are. You'll burst something.

TANGLE TOWER

It's easy to dismiss *Tangle Tower* as the equivalent of a Poirot-themed episode of Adventure Time, but it holds up as a compelling, character-driven mystery. Detectives Grimoire and Sally must unravel the mystery of a murder where the only suspect is a painting and very real blood on a very fake knife. As well as pleasing puzzles, elegant animation, and great voice acting, it's well-written enough that it's an anomaly: an adventure game where you actually want to click on everything, to hear all the dialogue. ■

80

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AVAILABLE ON

MAGIC THE GATHERING ARENA

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GROUP TEST

CPU COOLERS

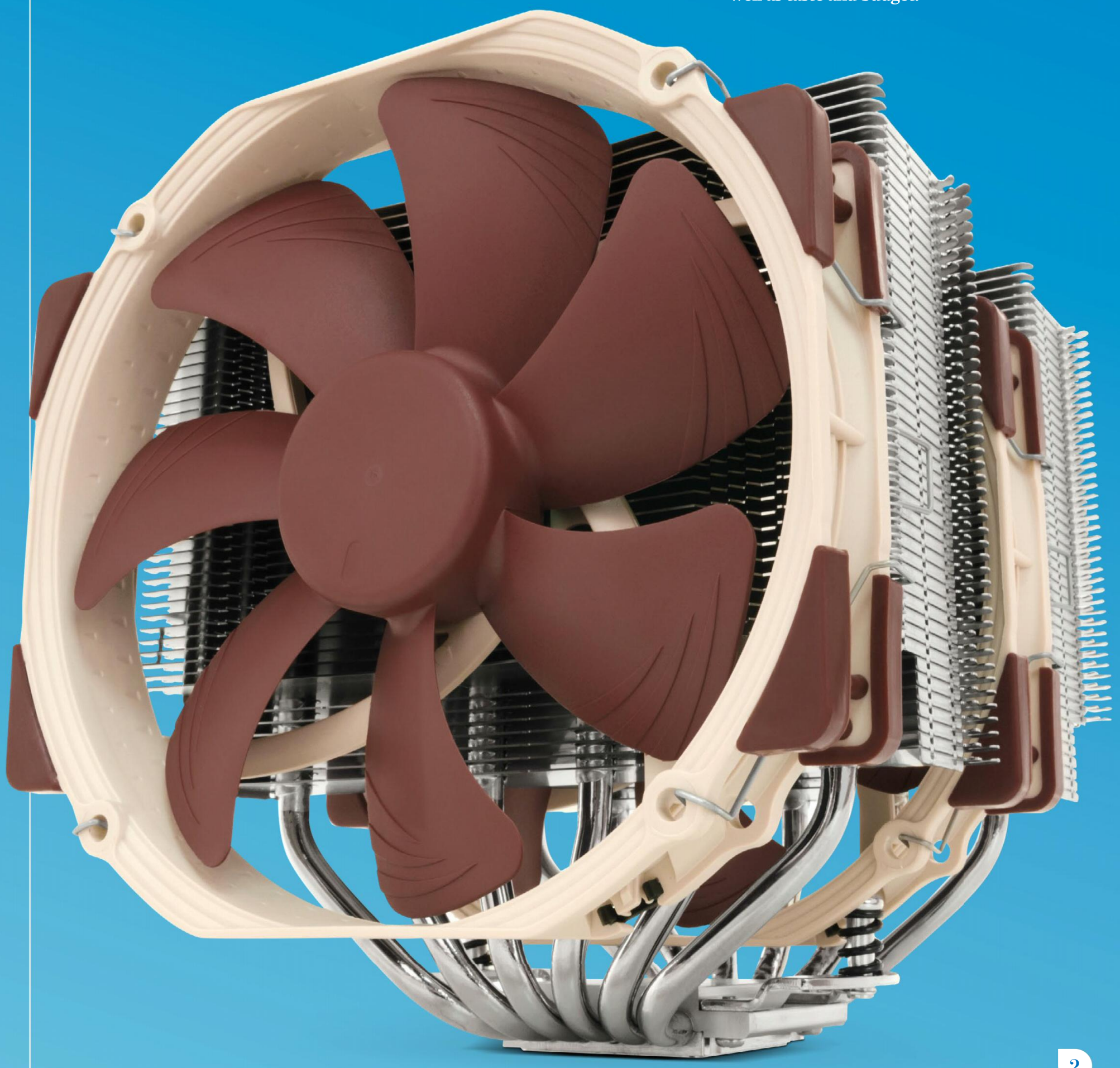
Whether you need an AIO or a heatsink, these chip chillers will get your processor up to speed.

By Terrence Mai, Michael Epstein, Jorge Jimenez, and Sarah James

Fitting one of the best CPU coolers is a must if you have a high-end CPU and power supply. With all that power, your PC is going to run hot so you should make sure you have a decent CPU cooler to keep your processor running cool and efficiently.

There are two types of CPU cooler to choose from. The first is an air cooler which has a big metal heat sink with a huge fan that blows heat away from your processor. The second option is a liquid cooling system, often known as 'all-in-one' or AIO.

Choosing the correct one largely comes down to what you feel comfortable with, as well as taste and budget.



2

H115i RGB Platinum

CORSAIR £140

The best liquid CPU cooler

1 Corsair was one of the first hardware manufacturers to bring all-in-one liquid coolers to market. The H115i Platinum is available in black or a stunning white with a set of addressable RGB LED fans and CPU block. It's a real head turner in any build but also has excellent software and performance to back it up.

Corsair supports all current AMD and Intel desktop CPU sockets, including Threadripper, and Corsair's iCUE software controls the RGB lighting effects, fan speeds, pump RPM, firmware updates, and customisation. A large 280mm radiator cooling field needs proper airflow, and Corsair ships a duo of ML140 PRO RGB LED fans to do the job. They use a 4-pin connector for lighting control, but the plugs are more proprietary and do not interconnect very well with the normal RGB 4-pin cables found on many motherboards and other coolers. It seems Corsair would like to nudge you to use its ecosystem of lighting and fan control devices.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ RGB lighting on fans and CPU block
- ⊕ Available in a stunning white variant
- ⊕ Top notch cooling
- ⊖ Not compatible with all cases

SPECS TYPE: LIQUID / **COMPATIBILITY:** INTEL 1366, 115X, 2011, 2066; AMD AM2, AM3, AM4, STR4 / **FAN SPEED:** 360-2200RPM / **NOISE:** 28-50DBA / **DIMENSIONS:** 280 X 120 X 30 MM / **WEIGHT:** 830G

NH-D15

NOCTUA £80

The best air cooler in 2020

2 It may be one of the most expensive air coolers we've tested, but Noctua's flagship NH-D15 is our top choice for high-end air coolers. Based on the company's award-winning D14, the NH-D15 performs just as well as a handful of all-in-one liquid coolers and even beats a few of them, both in performance and noise levels. The cooler features a dual tower heatsink and comes with two high airflow 140mm fans.

Towering 16.25cm above the CPU, the NH-D15's solid copper base is polished to a semi-smooth finish prior to nickel plating. Spring-loaded nuts clip to the cooler's factory-installed bracket thread over studs that protrude from the cross-bracket. The springs provide firm pressure to assure level seating of the cooler against the CPU heat spreader.

Even working at 100 per cent speed the cooler ran quieter than just about all of its competitors. If you aren't a fan of liquid cooling or don't have the space to mount a radiator, the NH-D15 is about as good as it gets for air cooling.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Excellent, quiet performance
- ⊕ Dual 140mm fans included
- ⊖ Bulky and heavy
- ⊖ Very expensive

SPECS TYPE: FAN AND HEATSINK / **COMPATIBILITY:** INTEL LGA 1150 – 2066; AMD AM2 – AM4, FM1 – FM2+ / **FAN SPEED:** 300-1500RPM / **NOISE:** UP TO 24.6DBA / **DIMENSIONS:** 165 X 150 X 161 MM / **WEIGHT:** 1.32KG

CLC 240

EVGA £105

Liquid cooling at an affordable price

3

EVGA's latest CLC liquid coolers are our favourite mid-range pick because of their excellent performance per dollar. Matching performance of the latest coolers from Corsair and NZXT, the 240mm CLC costs a fraction of the price while only sacrificing a few features. The included fans can get very loud at full speed, but we found the cooler to run well enough without ever reaching those levels.

With the EVGA Flow Control software, you have the ability to control both fan and pump curves based on CPU thermal load, and you can set RGB lighting profiles for the EVGA pump logo, but the pump unit lacks an RGB header to extend control any further. While you won't get the fancy addressable RGB lighting you'd find elsewhere, the EVGA CLC does have the same sleeved tubing and a single RGB light on the pump head that can be controlled through the software. If you don't care for all of the bells and whistles, EVGA's CLC 240 offers exceptional performance with little compromise.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Very affordable
- ⊕ RGB pump head
- ⊖ Supplied thermal paste is chalky
- ⊖ Very loud at full speed

SPECS TYPE: LIQUID / **COMPATIBILITY:** INTEL LGA2066/2011/2011-V3/1150/1151/1155/1156/1366 AMD AM2-AM4, FM1-FM2, TR4 / **FAN SPEED:** 500-2400RPM / **NOISE:** 16-40DBA / **DIMENSIONS:** 276 X 122 X 53 MM / **WEIGHT:** 830G

MA410M

Cooler Master £70

A mid-range air cooler with RGB lighting

4

Cooler Master has always been our highest recommended choice for a budget aftermarket cooler. For as little as £30 or so, the famed Hyper 212 has provided well over 25 per cent performance gains against stock cooling options. The company has also introduced some great liquid coolers over the years, but it wasn't until the new MasterAir series that the company began giving even the best coolers a run for their money.

The MasterAir MA410M is an excellent option that not only cools a system well, but also lights it up beautifully. A thermal sensor is nestled in the aluminium mounting base just above the heatpipes to provide temperature feedback to the RGB lighting control.

If you just want pure high performance air cooling, Noctua's NH-D15S is almost impossible to beat. But if you can accept slightly lesser performance, the MA410M has a modern blacked out appearance with addressable RGB lighting.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ 28 addressable RGB LEDs
- ⊕ Great cooling performance
- ⊖ As expensive as a liquid cooler
- ⊖ Quite bulky for smaller builds

SPECS TYPE: FAN AND HEATSINK / **COMPATIBILITY:** INTEL LGA2066/2011 V3/2011/1151/1150/1156/1155/1366, AMD AM4-AM2, FM2+-FM1 / **FAN SPEED:** 650-1,800RPM / **NOISE:** 6-31DBA / **DIMENSIONS:** 112 X 131 X 165 MM / **WEIGHT:** 1.13KG

CHOOSING A COOLER

Like most computer components, choosing the right CPU cooler depends on several variables, including performance requirements, case compatibility, budget restrictions, and aesthetics. To find the best CPU coolers for you, we tested all coolers' performance using Prime95 and a mixture of modern PC games for extensive stress testing. Our top selections were made based on thermal performance, noise, value, and overall feature sets.

If you aren't sure whether you need either an air cooler or a liquid cooler, it comes down to your budget and compatibility. We'd never recommend a stock cooler to any PC gamer, so those on tight budgets should still consider a cheap aftermarket air cooler. If you have a little bit more spending room, liquid coolers can offer a whole lot more – from advanced RGB lighting to intelligent software control.

Some of you may be wary about putting liquid near your expensive components, but rest assured all of the coolers recommended in this guide are backed with excellent warranties that will cover you in the event of a manufacturer failure.

If a high-end air cooler or AIO isn't sufficient for the clock speeds you're trying to achieve, the next step would be a full custom cooling loop with larger radiators able to remove even more heat from the system. For most mainstream platforms, something more modest will suffice.

Hyper 212 EVO

COOLER MASTER £30

Longtime king of budget air cooling

5 Cooler Master's budget-friendly Hyper 212 CPU cooler has been around for well over ten years now. With experience like that it comes as no surprise that the newer Hyper 212 Evo has become a renowned pick for affordable performance. Priced around £30, the latest update to the Hyper 212 Evo features four direct contact heatpipes, an improved aluminium heatsink, and a 120mm high airflow fan.

A high performance PWM fan with anti-vibration rubber pads and a set of quick-snap brackets are included with each CPU cooler. In addition, an extra set of brackets and pads gives the option of increasing performance by installing a second fan.

From our testing we found that the Hyper 212 Evo reduced CPU temperatures by up to 20 degrees Celsius when compared to stock cooling. Another added benefit is the fact that the cooler itself isn't a whole lot larger than a stock one, meaning it tends to stay out of the way of larger RAM modules.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Very affordable
- ⊕ Added AM4 compatibility
- ⊕ Extra fan upgrade
- ⊖ Loud at 100 percent speed

SPECS TYPE: FAN AND HEATSINK **/ COMPATIBILITY:** INTEL LGA 775 – 2066; AMD AM2 – AM3+, FM1 – FM3+, AM4 **/ FAN SPEED:** 600-2000RPM **/ NOISE:** 9-36DBA **/ DIMENSIONS:** 120 X 79.7 X 158.5 MM **/ WEIGHT:** 590G

H60 (2018)

CORSAIR £73

All-in-one liquid cooling for the price of air

6 As mentioned, Corsair was one of the first firms to bring all-in-one liquid cooling to the stage. Nearly a decade after the company launched its Hydro series, Corsair is once again leading the charge with the updated H60 (2018) as our top choice for liquid cooling on a budget. The new Corsair H60 liquid CPU cooler isn't a far cry from its predecessor, with a 120mm radiator and copper-plated block beneath the pump. However, the company redesigned the pump cap, which now has white LED backlighting and an octagonal shape. Priced £20 cheaper than our best high-end air cooler, the 120mm H60 offers near-identical thermal and noise performance at a fraction of the cost.

The updated cooler features a white LED illuminated pump head, 120mm radiator and one of Corsair's latest 120mm PWM fans. Our tests put the new H60 far ahead of its other 120mm competitors and even in line with a few 140mm and 240mm coolers.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Excellent performance
- ⊕ Compatible with most cases
- ⊖ Single colour pump LED
- ⊖ Power connector could be longer

SPECS TYPE: LIQUID COOLING **/ COMPATIBILITY:** INTEL 115X, 2011/2066; AMD AM2-AM4 **/ FAN SPEED:** 600-1700RPM **/ NOISE:** UP TO 28.3DBA **/ DIMENSIONS:** 157 X 120 X 52 MM **/ WEIGHT:** 600G

James Wooton at the 2019 Quantum Wheel game jam in Finland.

QUANTUM SPACEWAR!

How games and physics are coming together

The Digital Equipment Corporation began producing the PDP-1 in 1959. By 1962, someone had used the million-dollar computer to create a videogame: *Spacewar!*. It wasn't the first videogame, but it was the first that could be moved to other computers. And 'Quantum Tennis For Two' doesn't make such a good headline. *Spacewar!* even comes with an exclamation mark.

The point is, give a scientist millions of dollars' worth of computing equipment and they will try to use it to play games; and that's true even today, as IBM researchers developing quantum computers have discovered. Today, you can play *Battleships* on IBM's cloud-controlled quantum processor, if you have an account to use it and the right software.

As you might expect, *Quantum Battleships* differs slightly from the simple hit or miss mechanics of the classic game we've all played while on a wet summer holiday in Wales. Noise within the quantum system is interpreted as the effect of weather on the battleships, rolling with the waves and wind and therefore becoming harder to hit. Each battleship is represented by a pair of Qubits, which don't talk to one another during the game but nonetheless know each other's state through quantum entanglement. 'Bombs' are a mathematical operation that can affect the degree with which they agree with one another, from which you can work out damage. It's presented simply, but it's extremely complex.

YOU SUNK MY BATTLESHIP

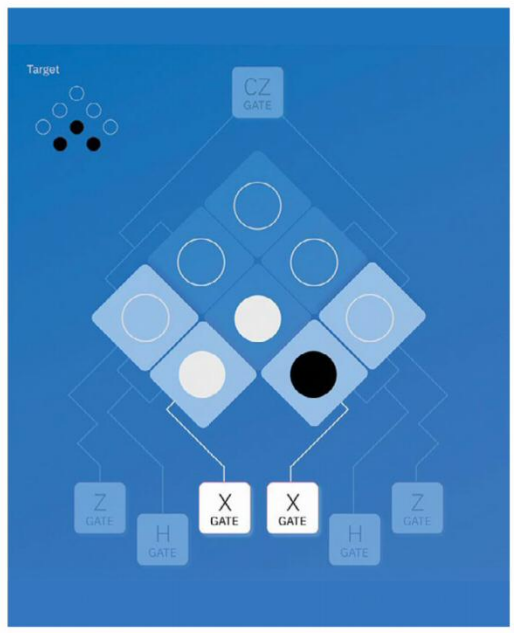
Which brings us to the man behind *Quantum Battleships*, James Wooton, who has worked for IBM Research for a year and a half and still doesn't know what he does there. Or maybe he's just being coy. "I do the things I do. That's what I do. And they are kind enough to pay me for it," he says mysteriously. *Battleships* is his second game for quantum computers, the first being a kind of Rock, Paper, Scissors in which quantum noise leads to exploitable biases in your virtual opponents.

"Back before 2016, it seemed like quantum computing was something that was a far-off technology," says Wooton. "Working as a researcher, it was sometimes a little bit demotivating, because you want to do things that are interesting, and engaging to the actual public. At that time, I worked for the University of Basel, and when IBM put the first quantum device on the cloud for people to use I started to doing a talk about what IBM was doing and how to use it. That first example was a sort of graphical interface, which still exists now, but as soon as it became possible to programmatically use these devices, my first thought was, well, now I'm going to make some games.

"If you look at computing history, they're very much looking at the idea of what games can do for computers.

Jamming in 2021

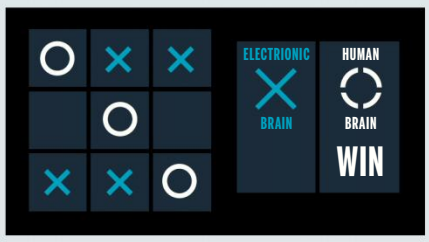
A game jam in Finland last year saw Wooton use IBM's biggest and best quantum computer for procedural generation, but unfortunately holding a gathering this year looks unlikely despite tentative plans for the autumn. There is hope, however, for a 2021 jam that may see new collaborations between game designers and physicists.



FAR LEFT: *QiskitBlocks* by James Weaver is an introduction to quantum computing using the open source Minetest engine.

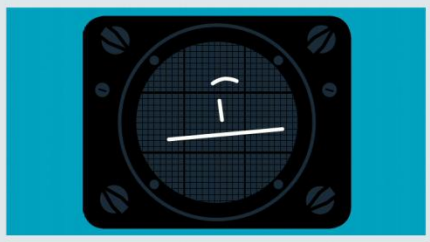
LEFT: *Hello Quantum* is an iOS and Android app from IBM that teaches the basics of quantum mechanics through puzzles.

GAMES IN UNUSUAL PLACES *Videogames go back a long way*



1 BERTIE THE BRAIN

Played noughts and crosses and was built for the 1950 Canadian National Exhibition. After two weeks on display, it was taken apart again.



2 TENNIS FOR TWO

A two-player game running on an oscilloscope, designed in 1958 for display at the Brookhaven National Laboratory's annual public exhibition.

3 THE LUNAR LANDING GAME

Written in 1969 for DEC's PDP-8 'minicomputer', the game was originally text based. Subsequent versions, like *Lunar Lander*, added graphics.

4 DEEP BLUE

A supercomputer built to beat humans at chess, Deep Blue defeated world champion Garry Kasparov in a six-game series in May 1997.

They're taking their technology to a trade show and trying to showcase it by making it run a game, or they're using it to educate people about the idea of programming, or they're using it for research. And this is basically what I was doing at that time. Using a game to show people an example of quantum programming that wasn't a fancy algorithm, but something more approachable."

The effects of quantum computing on the game industry go a little bit further than *Battleships*, however. "It's a bit of a speculative thing, but the game industry depends a lot on how long it takes to do stuff," says Wooton. "Where quantum computers are going to be useful in the future, when they're scalable and fault tolerant, is in procedural generation. Certain algorithms, such as optimisation and then constraint satisfaction and graph theoretic analysis could be very useful for this. We can start now, and it will just get ever more sophisticated until they are the big machines that we are aiming towards."

"TELEPORTATION HAPPENS IN QUANTUM COMPUTERS. IT'S NOT A SCI-FI CONCEPT FOR US"

TELEPORTING GRAPHICS

Procedural generation, you'll remember, is the way landscapes and entire levels can be spun out of nothing more than a 'seed' phrase and an algorithm. We saw it back in 2002, enabling *Soldier of Fortune II* to create infinite skirmish maps once you'd tired of mutilating enemies in 12 different places in the campaign, and more recently in *No Man's Sky*. So what is it about quantum computers that makes them so good for procedural generation? "The best way to get good results out of a quantum computer is to have it doing the things that quantum computers like to do the most," says Wooton. "So, for example, creating quantum interference effects is something that's very easy for a quantum computer, but not for a normal one. How we can use that in procedural generation was my first step on this journey. I see it as creating nice and interesting textures that you could use in a terrain generation algorithm."

And then it gets sci-fi. "I've come up with a way of generating animations," says Wooton, "where you transition from one image to another, which uses teleportation, because quantum teleportation is something that happens in quantum computers. It's not a sci-fi concept for us." OK, maybe not sci-fi after all. "Now I'm looking into more sophisticated uses." Gulp.

"I'm working on a new tool to help people use quantum computing in things like game jams," says Wooton, "or just for hobbyist programmers to have their first taste of quantum computing. All of this is concrete research, but also a tool for people to use."

If you're interested in learning how to program a quantum computer, or just want to see the games that are being made with the help of these machines, check out qiskit.org, and particularly the *Minecraft*-lookalike *QisketBlocks* from developer, author and speaker James Weaver. "There is a corner of *QisketBlocks* where you can go, and there's this nice island," says Wooton. "And you can learn that it's created by procedural generation. And then you can follow up and learn how to do that yourself." ■

Ian Evenden

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL

£1,127

MOTHERBOARD

GIGABYTE Z390 UD

Gigabyte **£107**

Surprisingly feature-rich for a budget board, this proves a fine home for 8th gen Intel chips.

PROCESSOR

Core i3-9100f

Intel **£70**

An incredibly nippy quad-core CPU for the price, Intel's 9th gen budget chip skips integrated graphics for affordability.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 2060 KO GAMING

EVGA **£299**

Nvidia's latest GPU generation isn't just for top-end machines thanks to EVGA's take on the 2060.

COOLER

Hyper 212 Evo

CoolerMaster **£22**

Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.

MEMORY

Vengeance LPX 16GB

Corsair **£73**

16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.

POWER SUPPLY

CX-M Series CX550M

Corsair **£55**

A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.

SSD

NEW ENTRY

Evo 860 M.2 250GB

Samsung **£53**

Sammy's trademark reliability and zippiness, packaged in a lithe M.2 format to add showmanship to any budget build.

HDD

WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM

Western Digital **£37**

One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.

CASE

Neos

Bitfenix **£36**

The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.

DISPLAY

Optix MAG271C

MSI **£240**

MSI packs huge value into this. You will have to start blaming your k:d on your broadband instead of your refresh rate though.

KEYBOARD

BlackWidow Lite

Razer **£55**

Silent and deadly as its namesake, this BlackWidow board from Razer is a joy to type on. No number pad though, be warned.

MOUSE

NEW ENTRY

Viper Mini

Razer **£40**

Small, light, ambidextrous and built for creamy flick-aiming thanks to some super-smooth PTFE feet.

HEADSET

HS35

Corsair **£40**

Deceptively luxurious for the price, Corsair's budget cans offer comfort and powerful low-end. Also colours. Very bright colours.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL

£1,789

MOTHERBOARD

X470 PRIME X470-PRO

Asus **£159**

Tasteful RGB (if that's your thing) and substantial heatsinks make this a fine base for any AMD build.

PROCESSOR

Ryzen 7 3800X

AMD **£320**

Once our top-end pick, AMD's Ryzen 7 is still as formidable but now realistic for mid-range builds, too. What a time to be alive.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 2060 KO GAMING

EVGA **£299**

Nvidia's latest GPU generation isn't just for top-end machines thanks to EVGA's take on the 2060.

COOLER

Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition

Corsair **£55**

Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.

MEMORY

Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666

Corsair **£73**

16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.

POWER SUPPLY

CX 650W

Corsair **£62**

It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.

SSD

Evo 860 250GB

Samsung **£138**

Samsung's Evo series has long been a stalwart of nippy r/w speeds and reliability, and this 250GB drive is very affordable.

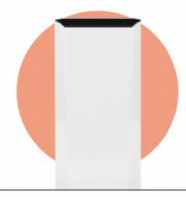
HDD

WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM

Western Digital **£37**

SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.

CASE



Eclipse P400S TG

Phanteks **£70**

The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.

DISPLAY

Predator XB271H

Acer **£378**

G-Sync and up to 180Hz of overclocked refresh rate – Acer's 27-inch Predator is quicker than a S1mple AWP peek.

KEYBOARD

K68

Corsair **£82**

Compact and comfortable, gushing with colourful RGB and built on a sturdy brushed steel chassis.

MOUSE

Model O Minus

Glorious **£42**

The lightest gaming mouse in production and one of the most responsive and comfortable out there. Look at those holes!

HEADSET

HyperX Cloud

Kingston **£74**

Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL

£4,113

MOTHERBOARD

ROG Maximus XI Code
Asus **£400**
Immense overclocking potential, and a look that's barely even recognisable as a motherboard. Space-age PCB tech.

PROCESSOR

Core i9 9900K
Intel **£459**
Intel's new 5.0GHz, 8-core monster rules the roost in the CPU market. And it comes in a fancy nine-sided box too, so there's that.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition
EVGA **£1,129**
EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER

Kraken X62
NZXT **£120**
The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY

Vengeance RGB Pro DDR4-3200
Corsair **£215**
Faster than you could ever reasonably hope to make use of unless you plan to edit three 4K movies at once, plus all that RGB.

POWER SUPPLY

HX750i 80 Plus Platinum
Corsair **£155**
Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD

NEW ENTRY

PM961 1TB
Samsung **£138**
Quick PCIe M.2 storage with a big old terabyte of storage, so you're not restricted to just your OS and a couple of games.

HDD

WD Blue 4TB
Western Digital **£87**
With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE

Enthoo Evolv ATX TG
Phanteks **£135**
The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY

NEW ENTRY

Predator XB271H
Acer **£839**
If you've never played at 144Hz before, are you ever in for a treat. A true gaming monitor with nippy response and 1080p.

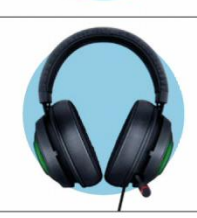
KEYBOARD

G915 Lightspeed
Logitech **£190**
Those low-profile keys feel like taking your fingers figure-skating. It's wireless too, so that's the cable jam dragon slain.

MOUSE

G502 Lightspeed
Logitech **£116**
The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET



Kraken Ultimate
Razer **£130**
Thundering bass that doesn't impinge on clarity, plus a mic your Discord mates will definitely notice. In a good way.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Gao Shun is one of Lu Bu's few trusted friends.

"Lu Bu feels like an arrow notched on a fraying bow string"

Rewriting Lu Bu's demise in **TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS**' latest DLC

Rewriting Lu Bu's real-life demise has been one of my most satisfying campaigns in *Total War: Three Kingdoms*. In real life (at least as depicted in the historical-inspired fiction of Romance of the Three Kingdoms), Lu Bu was a legendary warrior of unparalleled ability who slaughtered any champion who dared cross spears with him. But he was also extremely hot-tempered, erratic, and an incapable leader.

Despite being an iconic figure from that era of Chinese history, his story is painfully short: he betrayed his adopted father, the tyrant Dong Zhou, and tried to carve out his own piece of the fractured Han Dynasty, but couldn't stop betraying everyone who was nice to him. In the end, Lu Bu's own soldiers turned on him, and he was captured by Cao Cao and sentenced to death.

STEVEN MESSNER

THIS MONTH
Forged an empire in blood. Lots of blood.

ALSO PLAYED
Doom Eternal

My version, however, is a little different. In *A World Betrayed*, *Total War: Three Kingdom*'s new DLC, Lu Bu is one of two new factions. His campaign mechanics reflect his haughty temperament perfectly. Each time Lu Bu defeats an enemy, he builds Momentum that confers various bonuses, like improving his army's movement range, increasing satisfaction among his court, and making troops fight harder. But Lu Bu is a terrible leader and suffers large penalties to most forms of governance, giving him less administrator positions, more corruption, and a steep increase in building cost. His starting position is also incredibly weak, owning just a single minor settlement that is besieged by Cao Cao's forces. You can

I JUST COULDN'T ESCAPE THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO HIS REAL-LIFE DOWNFALL

Lu Bu's a one-man army against enemy units.

And he's practically unbeatable in a duel.

join up with Liu Bei to end that war quickly, but that still leaves you with little room to expand.

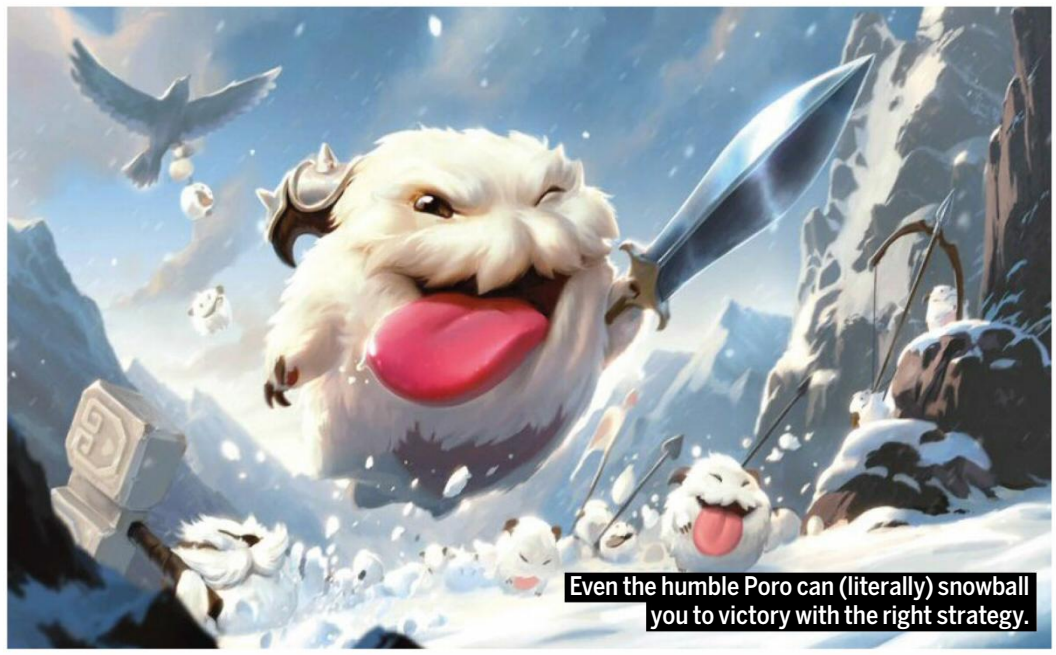
BU WHO?

It's for that reason that I restarted my Lu Bu campaign five times. Try as I might, I just couldn't escape the circumstances that led to his real-life downfall. I kept making bad decisions that either left me cornered against an invasion or pissing off my generals so much that they all betrayed me.

But on my fifth attempt, I finally managed to find a balance – if only because I chose to buddy up to the infinitely stronger (and more stable) Liu Bei and stay in his shadow just long enough to get a decent foothold. Then came war. Nearly 20 endless years of it. With Liu Bei as my close ally, I struck out against every other warlord around me, devouring them whole. As my Momentum maxed out, it was exhilarating to tear so recklessly across Northern China.

Lu Bu feels like an arrow notched on a fraying bow string. Pull too far and it can break, but if you can draw him back the right amount, his Momentum will carry him far.

Three Kingdoms is all about writing this iconic chapter of Chinese history, but putting this killing machine on the throne is one of my more satisfying achievements. Lu Bu would definitely be an awful emperor, but it's fun playing out an alternate history where his skill in combat carried him to the top. ■


Even the humble Poro can (literally) snowball you to victory with the right strategy.

"Every card feels like it has a place"

LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA is all killer, no filler

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Summoned a load of ghost sharks.

ALSO PLAYED
Ancient Enemy, Warhammer: Vermintide 2

Yep, for the second month in a row I've got Riot's new card game on the brain. It's safe to say I've fallen hard for *Legends of Runeterra* – and one of the biggest reasons is its rejection of filler.

You'll find that most card games are full of filler. Dull, generic creatures defined only by whether they're a 2/3 or a 3/2, or cards that will only be played because they're more common than their objectively better alternatives, or ludicrously niche minions and spells that don't actually fit into anyone's decks.

Whether they're there to pad out packs with fluff to make more desirable cards rarer, or to blandly fill awkward gaps in the game's design, or just 'for fun', they're the cards that clog up your collection while you're waiting for something much better to come your way.

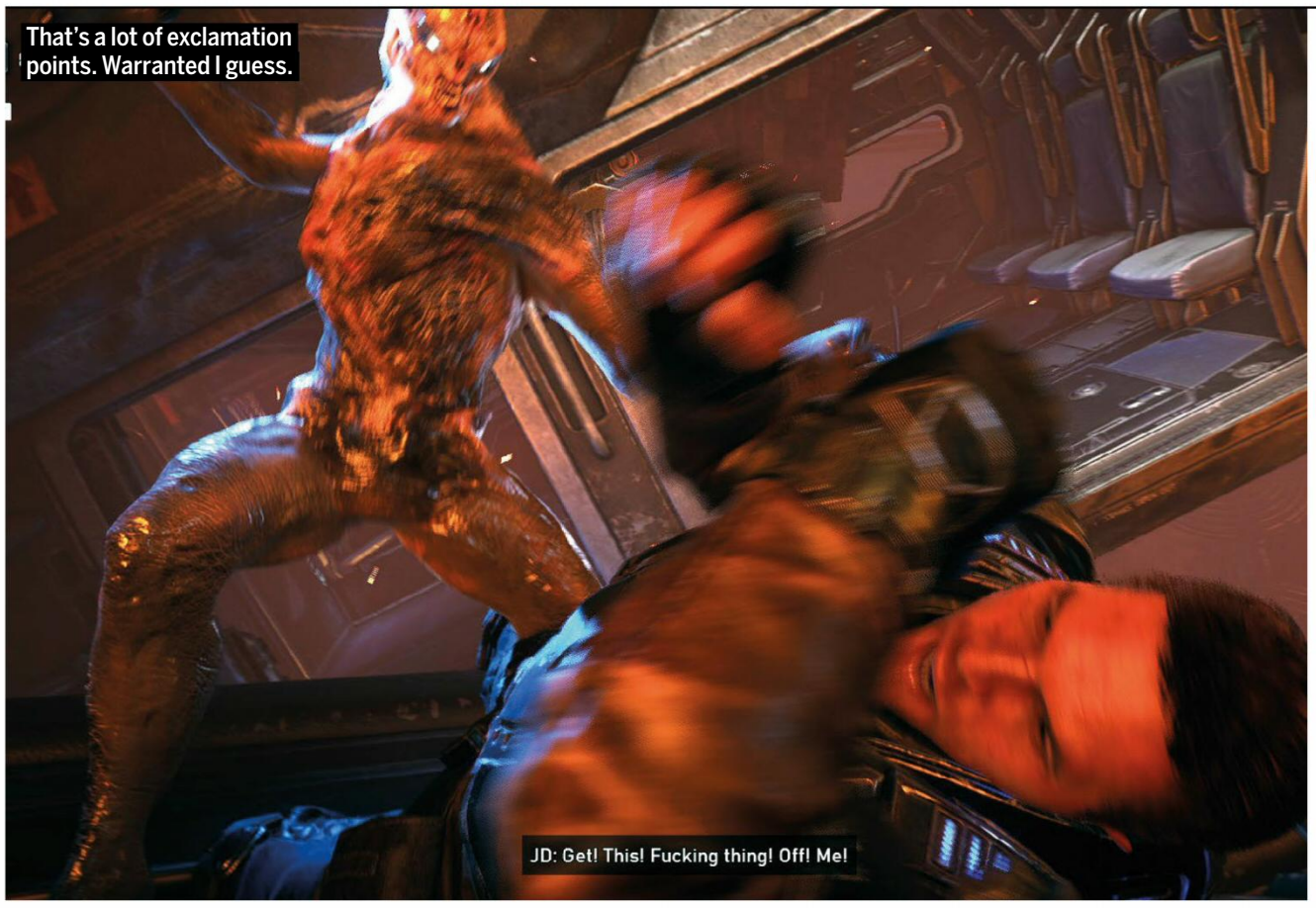
Legends of Runeterra very consciously does away with all that. Of course not all cards are equally competitive, but every single one feels like it has a place and a role. They all have a defining ability, keyword, quality, or synergy with something else, something to get your brain firing with new deck ideas.

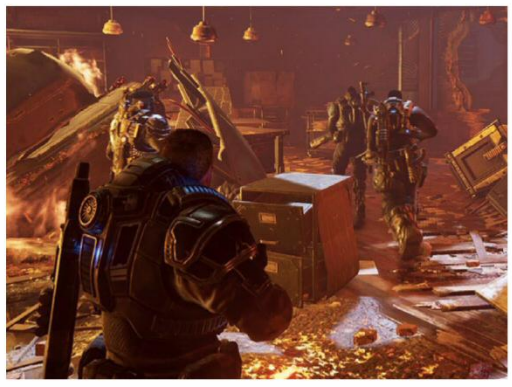
In-game, every one feel impactful. When they hit the board, something happens, and another step of your strategy clicks into place. For example, the Eager Apprentice isn't just a low cost, weak minion – he charges up your spell mana, setting you up for a dramatic play next turn. Bull Elnuk isn't just a beefy mid-game drop, it's ammo in the machine-gun barrage that is playing Troop of Elnuks and summoning half the furry beasts in your deck.

META MORPH

Many fundamentally change the nature of the board once they're in play, from freezing your opponent's top minion each turn, to replacing your entire hand with new cards. It's the 'if everything's overpowered, then nothing is' approach to balance, and so far it's working. The meta feels varied and interesting, full of different ideas and creative win conditions, and almost every game is dramatic and exciting.

It's early days yet, admittedly – the card pool is still relatively small, and yet to be diluted with new expansions. But so far I'm finding Riot's approach incredibly refreshing compared to any TCG I've played before. If they can keep it up, they'll have me knocking out games over my morning cereal for years to come. ■





"Fenix watches over his son JD as they bond over chainsawing aliens"

In GEARS 5, the series feels better than ever

Was *Gears of War* always this good? I remember grey games about grey men shooting grey aliens in grey ruins. They were games about grunting machismo and, for some reason, bad dads. The trend continues in *Gears 5* with father and son in the same squad. But now there's a wry self-awareness that defuses the oppressive 'oorah' war is hell (but good) mentality of the first few games.

Gears of War basically invented the cover shooter as we know it. I've talked with some people that think it's a curse that spawned an overwhelming number of clones. Is it really fun to slam your back against a wall and fire sporadically at distant enemies? I think it is, in *Gears 5* at least, thanks to the series' terrific armoury. The game's most basic gun is an assault rifle with a chainsaw attached. Warhammer 40,000 aficionados out there know this is exactly what all guns should be. If an enemy gets too close you press 'R' to rev the chainsaw up and carve your victim into bouncy chunks. It's gloriously excessive, slapstick violence, and it just doesn't get old.

TOM SENIOR

THIS MONTH
Chunked aliens with a great big chainsaw.

ALSO PLAYED
The Room VR, Iron Harvest

The shotgun in *Gears 5* is magnificent too. There's a puzzle solving element to moving between chunks of cover, swiftly crouch-walking around corners to get a point blank flanking blast with the shotgun. And then you're rewarded with a spectacular instant kill.

If you play passively, the enemies feel like bullet sponges that take a little too long to go down, but the game nudges you towards aggressive moves. It seems counterintuitive in a game that's essentially about hiding, but if you manoeuvre yourself into the right position, it's a highly lethal shooter. Multiplayer fans have known this since the first few games, but as I battle through *Gears 5*'s colourful and often beautiful locations, I feel like I'm starting to understand what the game is all about, and why it has endured for so long.

IT'S GLORIOUSLY EXCESSIVE, SLAPSTICK VIOLENCE, AND IT JUST DOESN'T GET OLD

GEAR HEAD

There is a strong rhythm to each mission. There's a slow talky bit, then something spectacular to look at, then a few rooms of combat, and then you throw a grenade into a sinkhole to stop enemies spawning. It's simple, but it works. And you get to enjoy a soap opera at the same time. Marcus Fenix, the series' main dad, watches over his son JD as they bond over chainsawing aliens. Like all dads in Gears games, he is disapproving of your approach to certain missions, but I have faith that these two can keep it together in the face of yet another alien invasion, despite some bickering.

It's a generous package. The whole campaign is playable in co-op, and there's a horde mode and solid multiplayer to enjoy. The game feels as big and chunky as one of those big grey marines. Solid, dependable, and a worthwhile trip to gaming's recent history. Also the Hammer of Dawn is one of the best space lasers around, so it's worth a play just for that. ■

"The game's not a death plummet, it's a bungee jump"

Feeling loved while trying to escape from HADES

Given everything that's happening in the world right now, I've been using games to dive into happier and more welcoming places, which is why I've been taking regular trips to Hell. There's only really one objective here: escape from the land of the dead. Considering the fact that my dad is the lord of the underworld (sadly, not in real life), this is basically a game about moving out of your parent's house. A hell of a good one (do you see what I did there?).

Ordinarily, I don't enjoy *Souls*-likes and roguelikes. Games that go out of their way to make life as difficult as possible? Games that make the prospect of bettering yourself seem like an all-but-insurmountable task? Games that say "all those other games don't understand you, if you want to become a truly better player, you need to stick with me, your skills are crap but I can teach you how to rise to greatness"? That's negging, and I don't respond well to it.

Hades is not a death plummet, it's a bungee jump. It's wearing roguelike trousers – I die again and again, starting from the very beginning each time, slowly becoming more powerful through persistent currency and items – but those trousers are nestled inside a safety harness of love. Dad mocks and jeers each time I'm sent painfully back to the familial quarters, but the gods of Olympus are on hand each and every run to offer me temporary perks and bonuses.

LUKE KEMP

THIS MONTH
Died repeatedly, and loved every minute of it.

ALSO PLAYED
Wattam

PERK LIFE

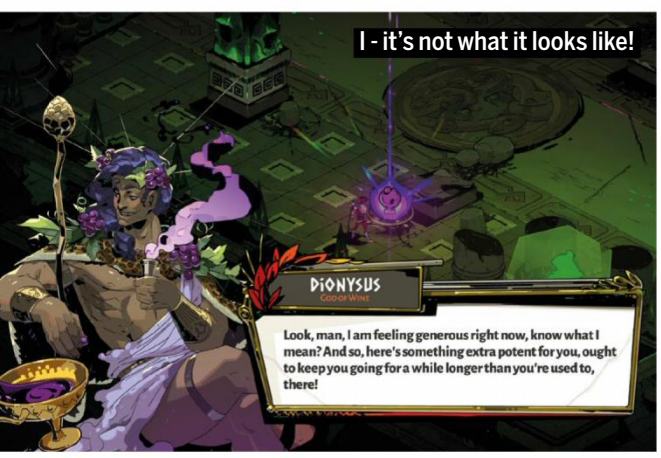
Hey, have this to deal more damage! Take this to receive less damage! This will give your dash offensive power! This gives enemies a chance to drop health! And many, many, many more.

I DON'T EVEN SWEAR WHEN I DIE; AND FOR ME, THAT IS HIGHLY UNUSUAL

This almost endless parade of boons plays a large part in ensuring that each and every run feels truly unique, something most roguelikes struggle to achieve. I don't even swear violently when I die; and for me, that is highly unusual.

In fact, I adored *Hades* before I even started playing it. In the menus, I found that there's a god mode to make me close to unkillable, which they advise players to use if they want to concentrate on the story, or "for any reason". Isn't that wonderful? I haven't turned god mode on yet, but I love the fact that it's an option, and that the developer makes it clear that it won't think any less of me for doing so.

Much as I'd like to say "I can't believe it's an Early Access game!" due to the reams of content, luscious art, great acting, and so on, I can in fact easily believe it. Partly because *Hades* shouts at me about this on the title screen, and partly because of those regularly scheduled, superb updates. Yet another way the game shows me that it loves me. See, developers? It *is* possible to challenge the player while still being kind to them. Drop the negging, and let's see more healthy relationships like this.



DESTINY 2

Post-*Shadowkeep*, Bungie's shooter is a shadow of its former self. *By Phil Savage*

When I finished *Shadowkeep*'s campaign, I felt hopeful for the future of *Destiny 2*. While the second expansion wasn't exactly flush with things to do, it felt like a solid foundation on which to build a year's worth of stuff. It followed, after all, arguably one of the strongest years in the *Destiny* series' history. With Bungie now independent from Activision surely good things were to come.

As we settle into the third of the *Shadowkeep*-era's four planned seasons, though, it's clear that year three has not lived up to its promise. Where once *Destiny 2* was an ever-expanding playground of fun activities, desirable rewards, and hidden secrets, now it's season-to-season structure asks too much of your time for too little benefit.

Year two rewarded you for playing, but never punished you for taking a break. Its seasonal activities – Black Armory forges, the Menagerie, the oft-maligned Reckoning – are all still present. The weapons introduced in these modes, like Spare Rations, Beloved, Kindled Orchid, and Hammerhead, are all still available and still desirable. In year three, though, seasonal activities, and the chance to earn their associated rewards, are removed and replaced when a new season begins.

The upshot of this is that each season is a checklist of things to do before time runs out: complete the battle pass, unlock the weapons, farm for the best rolls on said weapons, discover the lore entries, finish the collection badge, earn the title seal. It's exhausting.

FEAR FACTOR

Season of the Undying's over-reliance on the fear of missing out felt almost predatory. I've put many hours into the *Destiny* series, but this was the first time I felt the need to question whether it had become an unhealthy relationship. Likely in response to the complaints, subsequent seasons reduced the grind – making the title seals easier to earn, and reducing (or even removing) the quests that players undertook to earn ritual weapons. The FOMO is lessened but the way it's been achieved seems like a misdiagnosis of the larger problem.

As I write, *Season of the Worthy* is still early – more things will likely unlock in the coming weeks. But so far it's one of the sparsest seasons in *Destiny*'s history. It offers a new public activity, and remixed, more difficult versions of a handful of lost sectors. Mostly it features bounties: lots and lots of repeatable tasks that you're required to complete to unlock progress with the new vendor. Both activities are pretty decent, if quite slight, and I'll admit it can be very satisfying to spend an evening working through a list of small, easily achievable tasks. But it's still a far cry from *Destiny* at its best.

There are other problems, too, Bungie can seemingly only respond to the established meta with nerfs. In the last round, snipers and grenade launchers were hit hardest. I expect the meta to shift each season, but there has to be some give, as well as some take. Right now, it too often feels like players are being punished for investing in specific, advantageous loadouts, and the result is that guns that once felt great to use no longer have the same shine.

Throughout its history, the *Destiny* series has been kept alive through one simple, core truth: the guns feel good to shoot. As weapon archetypes have their rough edges sanded away for fear of them becoming overpowered, that mantra is in danger of no longer being the case.

The big moments in *Destiny* have always been the reveal of challenging missions that offered desirable, powerful rewards. So far, this year has lacked any such event. Even *Season of Dawn*'s most intriguing mystery – an infinite maze that challenged the community to spend days poring over spreadsheets, assembling a map – ended with disappointment when the reward turned out to be a weapon already revealed on the seasonal roadmap. To an extent, this isn't a surprise. Bungie no longer has Activision studios like Vicarious Visions at hand to help create content, so of course there's less of it. But what does exist, and how it's been implemented, has proven itself a poor substitute. ■

IT'S ONE OF THE SPARSEST SEASONS IN DESTINY'S HISTORY

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Oct 1, 2019	**DEVELOPER** Bungie
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** bungie.net

VAULT DWELLERS *An ode to the guns that now sit in my vault, untouched*

IZANAGI'S BURDEN
For a while, this was the king of boss DPS. But a round of sniper nerfs with the loss of its Outlaw reload perk hurt a lot.

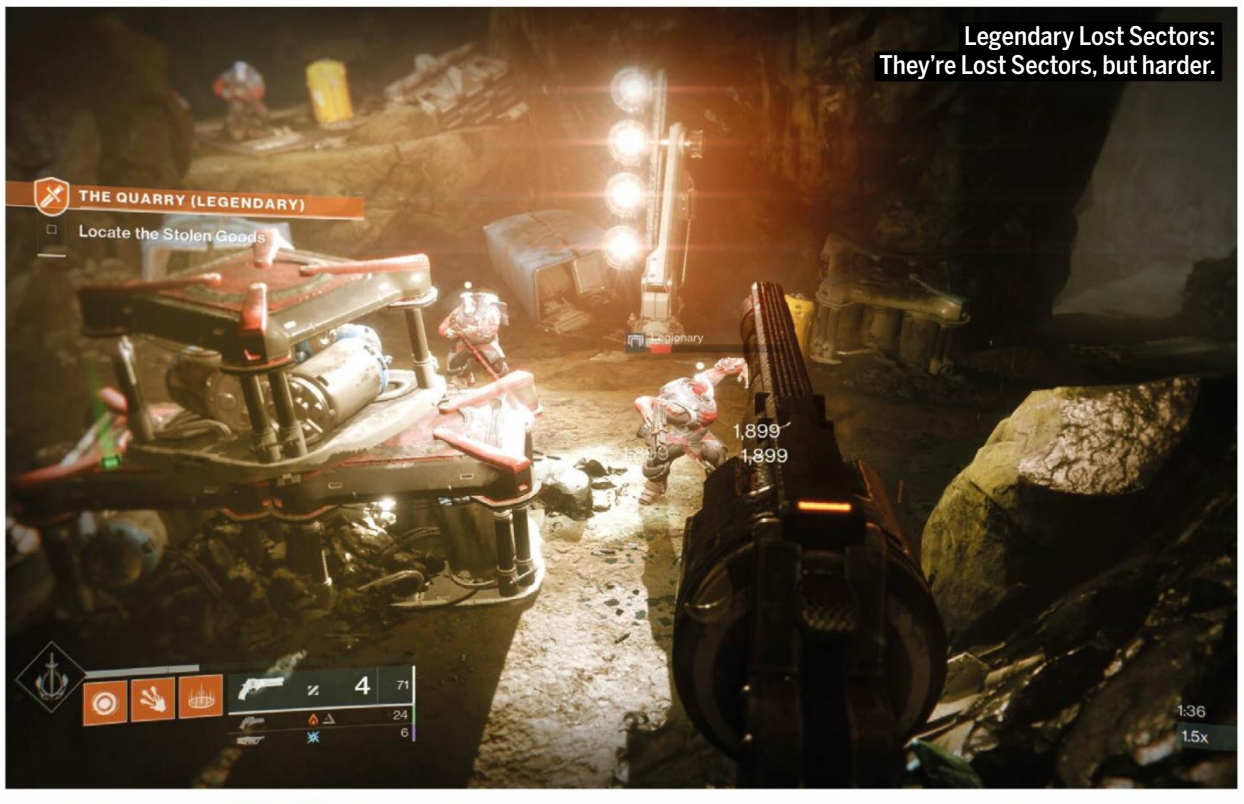
NOT FORGOTTEN
Arguably the hardest gun to earn in the game. The nerf to its signature perk signalled the end of its PvP ascendance.

RECLUSE
This is still a very good gun. The slight nerf to its perk still keeps it viable, but I was happy to try some other guns out.

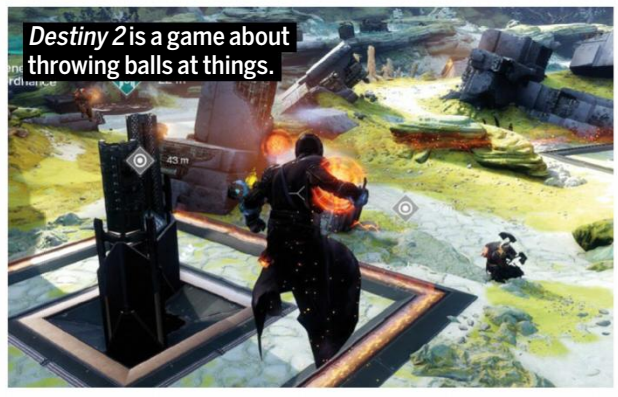
OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE
I never got a good Swarm of the Raven, so this was my launcher of choice. Aggressive frames got nerfed big, though.

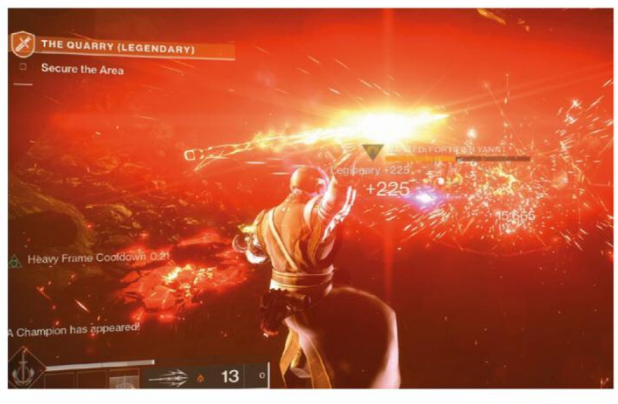
THE LAST WORD
I've never been good with this gun. Its nerfs raised the skill floor a lot, so now other people are bad with it too.

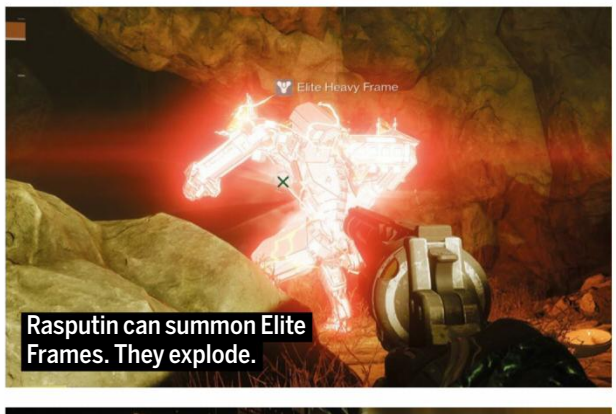
Here's a shot from *Season of the Undying*. It has since died.



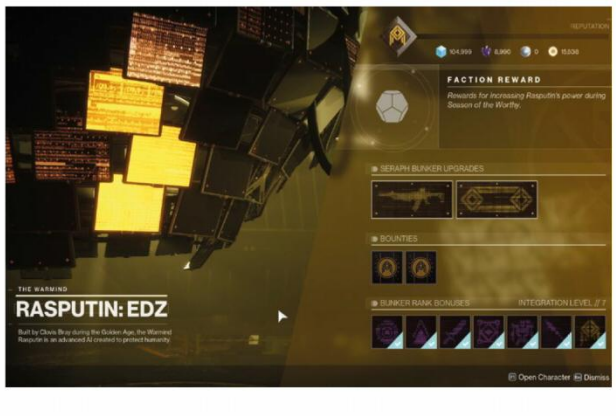
Legendary Lost Sectors: They're Lost Sectors, but harder.

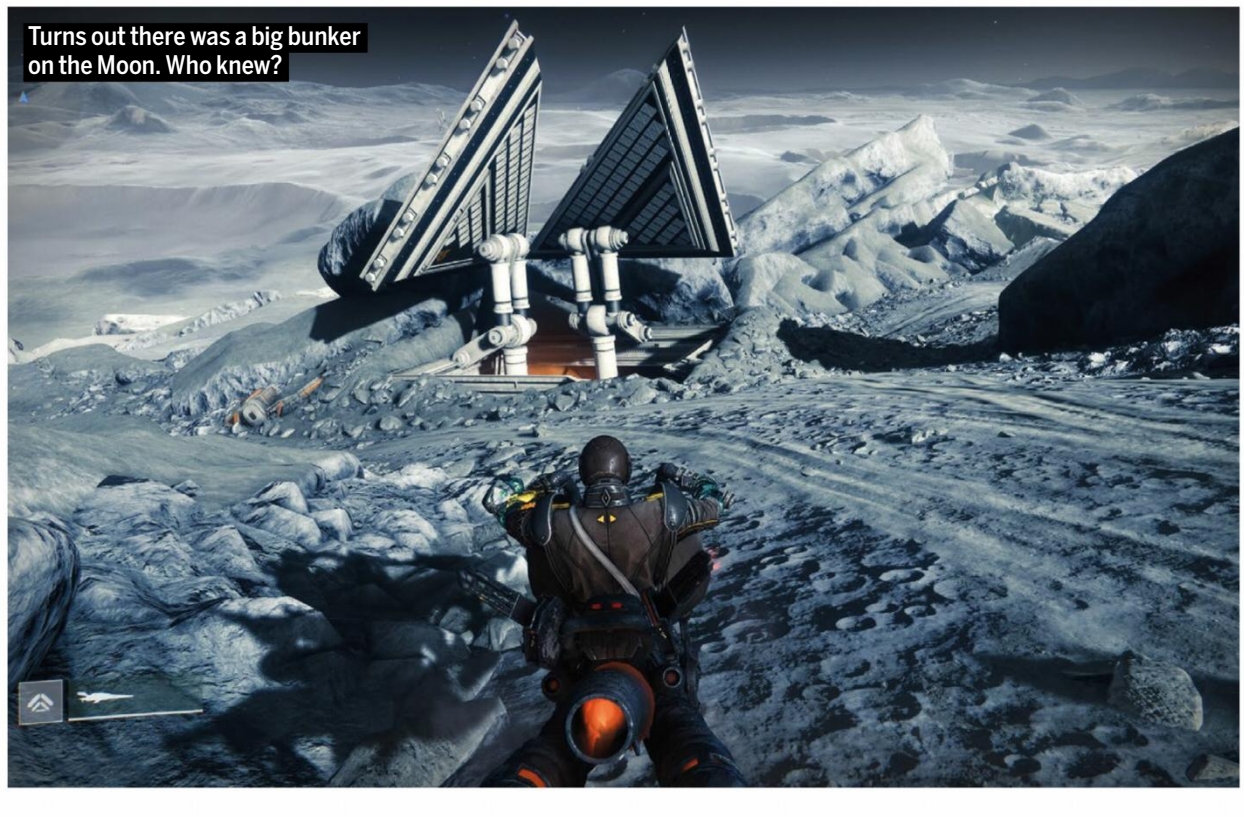

Destiny 2 is a game about throwing balls at things.



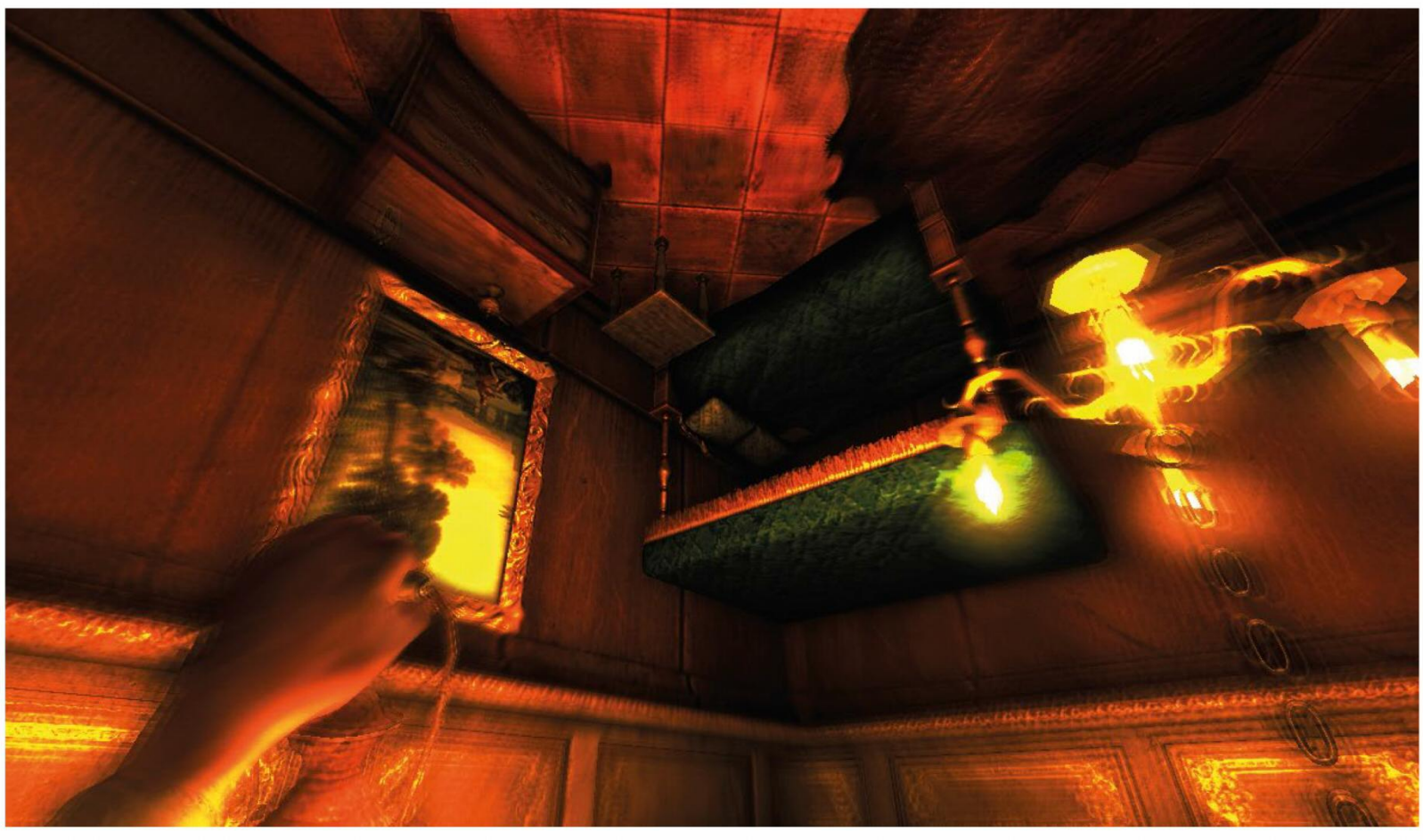


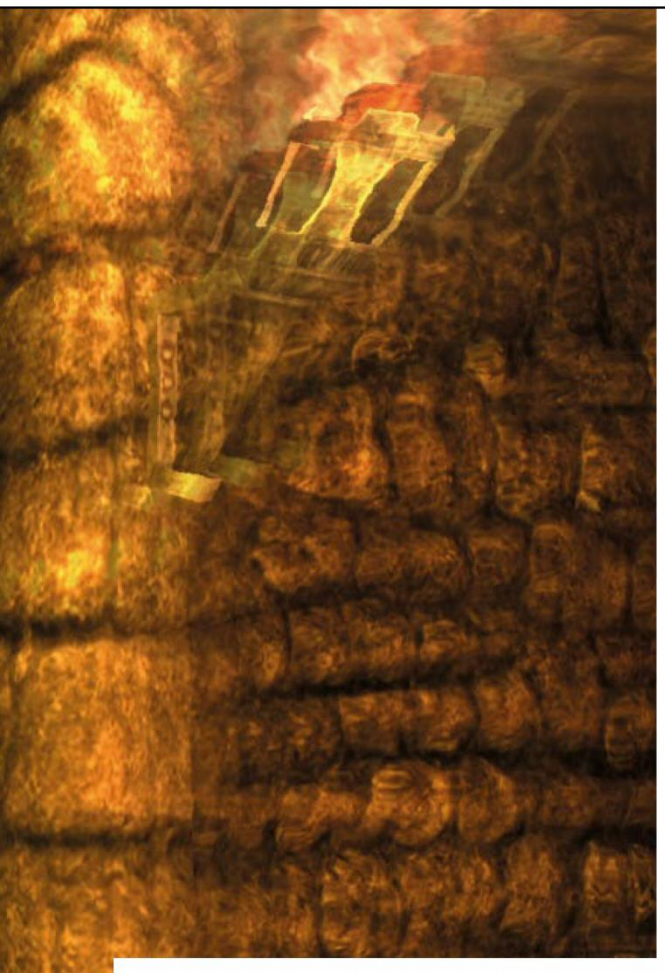
Rasputin can summon Elite Frames. They explode.

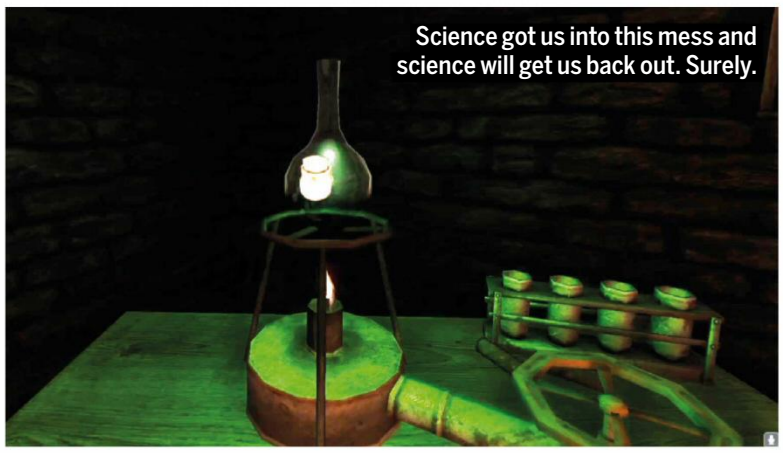



Turns out there was a big bunker on the Moon. Who knew?

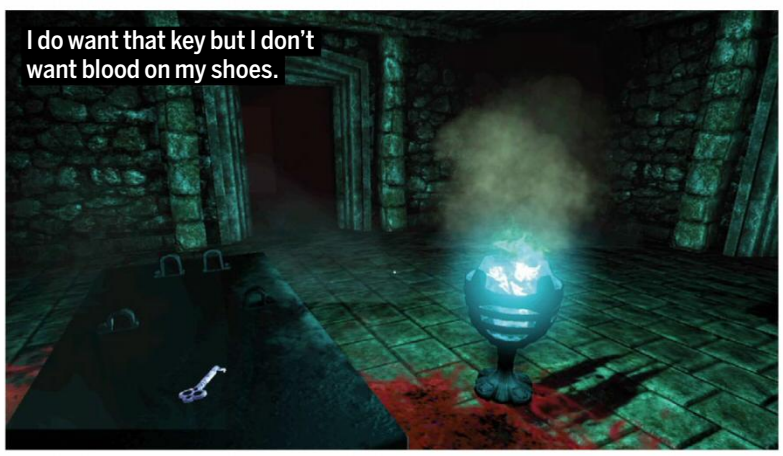
A face you never want to see.







Science got us into this mess and science will get us back out. Surely.



I do want that key but I don't want blood on my shoes.

AMNESIA: THE GREAT WORK

Something to tide you over til *Rebirth*. *Lauren Morton*

As I stand precariously on top of a box in a flooded basement, I finally decide that *The Great Work* is the best possible follow-up to *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. Its story is not a continuation from Daniel's adventure defeating Alexander in Brennenburg Castle, but it's loosely set in the same universe. Though featuring its own story and puzzles, it occasionally returns to some series favourites, playing off what I already know from the main game.

That's how I feel so sure, before I actually try it, that when I step into the knee-high water surrounding my tiny island of safety, I'll immediately be chased by the invisible monster that anyone who's played *Amnesia* will likely remember. Sure enough, when I dunk my feet in to sprint to the next floating crate, I'm followed by angry splashing and a clamouring orchestra singling my doom. It's a throwback to *Dark Descent*'s water section, designed to give me a fun taste of the familiar before continuing to string me along *The Great Work*'s own spooky story about alchemy, hubris, and impending doom.

WELCOME TO MINNEBURG

The Great Work is one of many custom stories for *Amnesia: The Dark Descent,* but even seven years after its release it still feels like the best second course to the original game. Although he isn't mysteriously robbed of his memory the way Daniel is in *Dark Descent*, the protagonist goes through a similar experience wandering through an unfamiliar castle pulled along by stories of the occult in every hallway.

Partially set in another castle – Minneburg this time around – Charles Longden has arrived with his research partner Jane to study the abandoned location. A sudden ground tremor wakes Charles late in

SEVEN YEARS AFTER RELEASE IT STILL FEELS LIKE THE BEST SECOND COURSE TO THE ORIGINAL GAME

the morning and he quickly finds that Jane is missing and the door to her room has a hole busted in it.

Charles is quick to finish the job by fully breaking the castle's old wooden door. Thanks to a quick rifle through Jane's papers, I get a bit of backstory, a key to the storeroom, and one of *Amnesia*'s ever-valuable tinderboxes. It seems that Jane's gone exploring deeper into the castle through the storage room and naturally Charles is keen to follow after. Jane can save herself, as far as I'm concerned. I've seen how quickly things can get spooky in an abandoned castle, but Charles is more of a gentleman than me.

I take a quick spin through the ground floor hallway of the castle, re-learning how to *Amnesia* properly. *The Great Work* reuses *Amnesia*'s

GHOST STORIES *Even more custom horror tales*

WHITE NIGHT

White Night is set inside a hospital where David wakes up with no memory of why he's there. It's more a thriller than horror, but has a great story.

ABDUCTION

Set a year after *Dark Descent*, *Abduction* puts you in Daniel's shoes for another adventure. Alexander is back in this custom sequel.

THROUGH THE PORTAL

This one takes place after one of *Dark Descent*'s cliffhanger endings. It's short, not too spooky, but it is very pretty.

LA CAZA

Another new setting, *La Caza* follows a scientist whose plane crashes in the middle of a jungle where they'll need to survive and escape.

standard tutorial tips about darkness, health, and sanity management as far as I can tell, but it's really all you need to be getting on with. The only reminder I didn't helpfully get was how to use inventory items on objects in the environment, but a quick online search solved that.

Exploring the main hall storeroom felt a bit like that cowardly negotiation we've all done in a swimming pool – dipping in a toe, then a leg, then a torso, and wincing all the while instead of plunging in. I might have done better to burst into my first taste of sanity-draining darkness with more panache, but it did feel just like my first spin through *Dark Descent* all over again. Do the creepy crackling sounds and uncanny screen effects signal danger or just the slow drain of Charles' sanity? The storeroom's safe, fortunately, and it doesn't take long to find a switch opening a passage to the lower levels.

I won't say that *The Great Work* tosses you in the deep end after that. It's too savvy for that kind of brute force. Things do descend into darkness quickly, from ominous underground roses, to haunted and abandoned dungeons, to the familiar conviction that you're being stalked through narrow hallways.

At about two hours in, a bloody and stressful climax in Minneburg's Sanctum may have you thinking that you're nearing the end of what would be a well-designed custom story spanning several areas. After a tense chase leading back above ground, you'll soon find that Minneburg was only the first lengthy chapter in a seven part adventure that will likely take you around ten hours to finish.

Aside from the deceptively intense conclusion to chapter one, *The Great Work* is well-paced. Mod author Damascus7 clearly understands the structure – both of plot and physical space – that made *Dark Descent* tick. Periods of stressful exploration as you avoid familiar brutish monsters are bookended with short reprieves to breathe and explore freely.

After the chapter one finale, Charles wakes up in a posh London mansion. Velvet curtains are pulled back from the bedroom window to let in the light and birds chirp outside. Charles has a few minutes respite to meet his saviour – separated though they are by a barricaded door – before things turn dark again. The shadows are now following them both and the mansion doesn't stay safe for long. *The Great Work* signals each change in tension with cues like hall candles being snuffed out and a change in music.

I don't want to even talk about the moving statues of angels that will immediately remind anyone familiar of Doctor Who's creepy Weeping Angels. Just be aware that they do exist and, contrary to your prevailing instincts, do not look at them, or you'll quickly lose whatever sanity Charles is still holding onto.

Things carry on getting more and more arcane with each chapter. *Amnesia*'s orbs are once again part of the equation as Charles follows in the footsteps of a group of alchemists called the Invisible College who became mired in attempts to create the Philosopher's Stone. It's consistently well-written and voice acted to a degree that you can easily forget you're playing a custom story and not Frictional's own campaign.

THE GREAT WORK'S PUZZLES ARE EQUALLY INTELLIGENT AND CREATIVE

CREEP SHOW

The Great Work's puzzles are equally intelligent and creative. Most solutions are hinted at in writings that Charles finds in each area, though some rely on your perception of the environment, and having and using a bit of intuition.

In the first chapter alone, you'll encounter a variety of tasks. In the lower levels of Minneburg, I needed to repair and turn on a mechanical door opener with objects found in various rooms around the level. After that there are secret passages to find and alchemical recipes to attempt based on the notes of the Invisible College members.

Following chapters continue on with a combination of more alchemy, a bit of platforming, sequence puzzles, and more. Naturally it's all carried out with a layer of monstrous dread on top as Charles is often evading the shadowy creatures that are hot on his heels.

The Great Work rewards all of my hoarding and thorough searching habits just as *Dark Descent* does. More than once my insaitable drive to search every desk drawer and dive into every stack of crates leads to an extra healing draught or tinderbox. Other times, exploring the levels themselves requires a willingness to throw aside every object that Charles can shove.

Other environmental clues are equally well-placed but easy to miss, which I appreciate just as well as the ones that were more obvious to me. Down in the flooded storage area in chapter three, I entirely overlooked a way to climb onto the pipes overhead to avoid a good portion of the dangerous water spelunking.

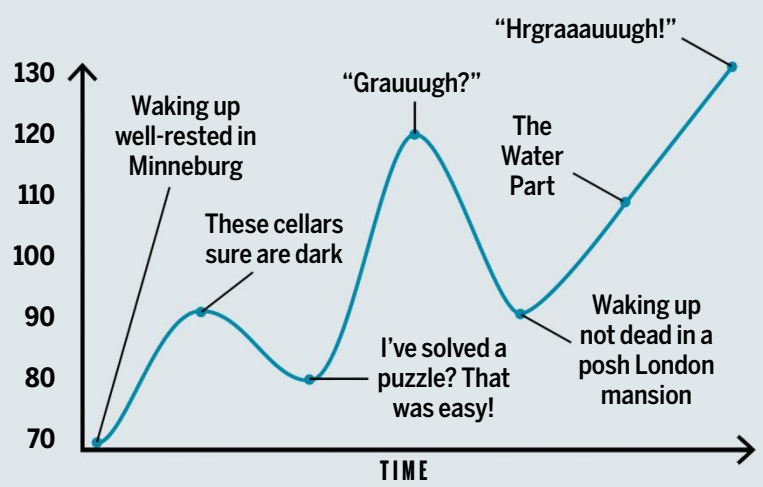
On occasion *The Great Work*'s puzzles are a bit obtuse. More than once, I finally wound up at a solution that, in retrospect, made sense but what was meant to be a clue did not feel like one in the midst of monster dodging and puzzle solving. That's a complaint I've had with plenty of fully-developed games so I can hardly hold it against this custom story. As always, some clues will be quite obvious to one person and incomprehensible to others.

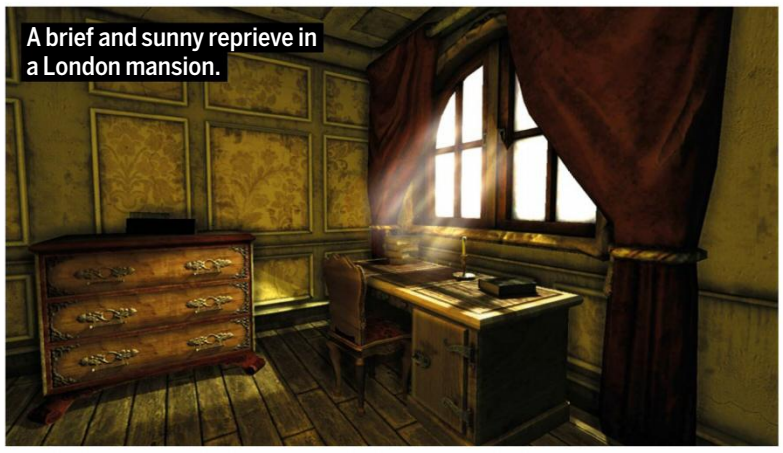
You're best off keeping mod author Damascus7's own puzzle solution guide close at hand in the event you get stumped. Do be warned, their guide covers the use of items to solve puzzles but there are a few sections, mostly those that involve running from enemies, that you'll be left to figure out alone. In traditional *Amnesia* fashion you'll of course run instead of fight, but where to isn't always abundantly clear. For that, I found myself looking up a video playthrough more than once.

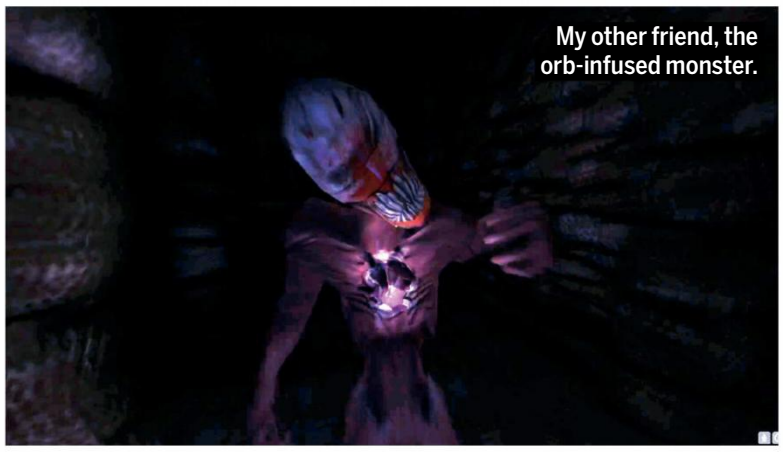
Despite the occasionally frustrating puzzles, *The Great Work* does follow in the spirit of *Dark Descent* better than many other custom stories out there. Charles' tale is new, but shares the occult horror elements of Daniel's adventure that make it feel fresh but familiar. If you wish to return to the series as Frictional Games' new sequel *Amnesia: Rebirth* approaches release, *The Great Work* is an excellent horror adventure that shows a crystal clear understanding of what made *Dark Descent* so horrifyingly good. ■

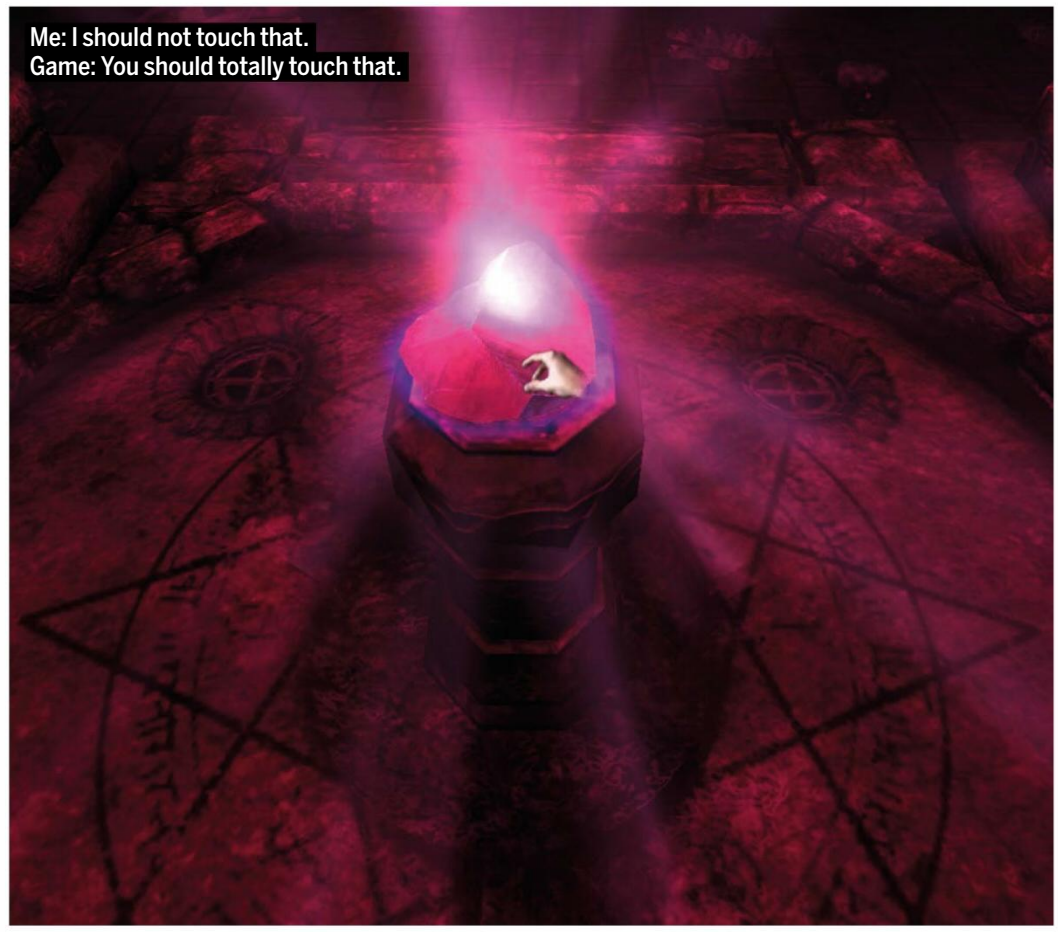
SPOOKOMETER

My heart rate, artistically rendered




A brief and sunny reprieve in a London mansion.


My other friend, the orb-infused monster.


Me: I should not touch that.
Game: You should totally touch that.

I can only assume the flowers are locked up because they're dangerous.

FIGHT TO VICTORY IN CALL OF DUTY: WARZONE

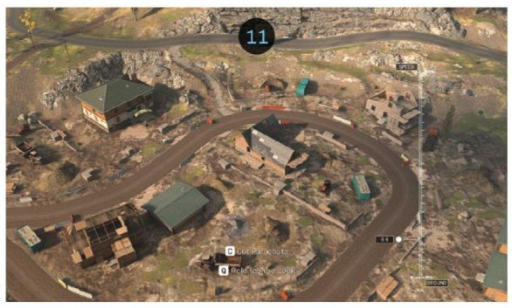
Complete contracts, make money, and grab loadouts to dominate Verdansk. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

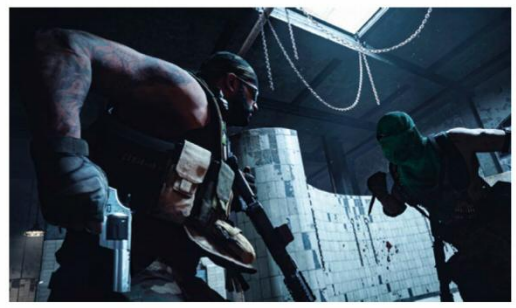
TIME
Three hours

VITAL LINKS
Map tips:
bit.ly/3alT8pJ
Best guns:
bit.ly/3amhLme
Gulag guide:
bit.ly/3bqnbwy



PRE-GAME

1 Resist the urge to go AFK in the pre-game lobby, as you might in *Fortnite* or *PUBG*. Because here the kills you get progress your battle pass and weapon XP – a nice reward for getting your trigger finger warmed up.

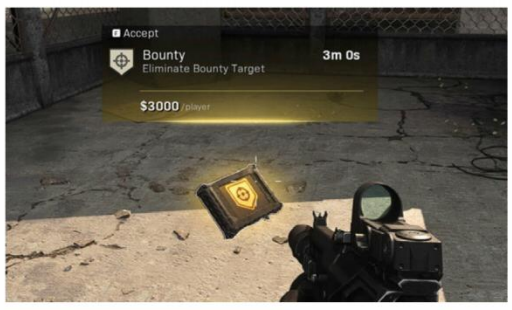


LAGGING BEHIND

2 Up to a certain point in the match, you can redeploy after death if you win a 1v1 face-off in the Gulag. Spray paint your rival before you fight and practice in the close-quarters Gunfight mode to get the edge and make a return.

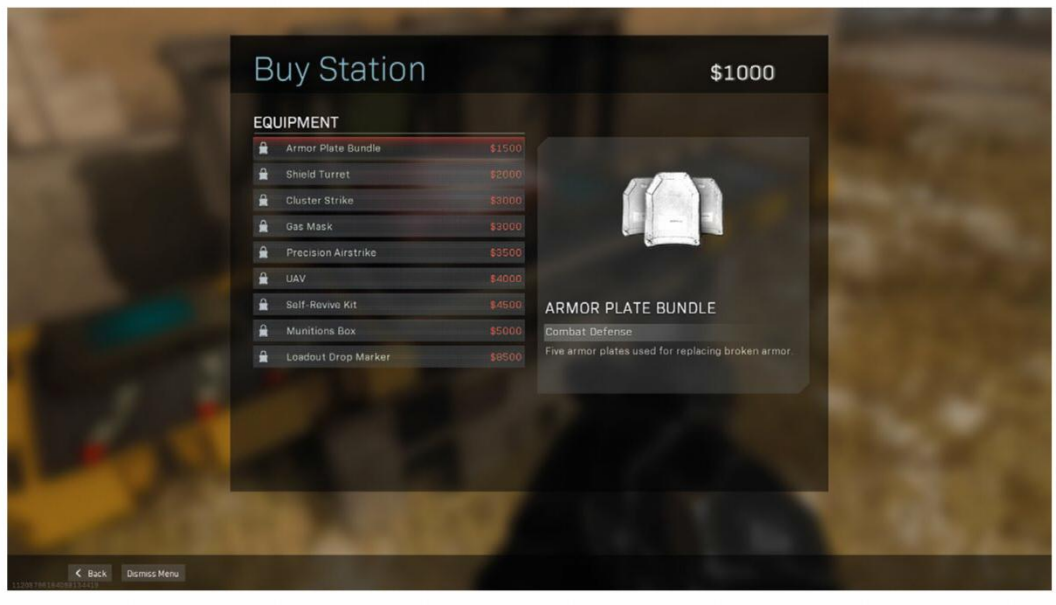
GOLD DIGGER

3 *Warzone* is all about making money. Locate Buy Stations to spend your hard-earned *CoD* dollars on gear, killstreaks and even bringing a teammate back from the dead. Spend your first moments in the game amassing as much cash as possible.



CONTRACT KILLER

4 One of the best ways to make money is through in-game Contracts. Scavenger objectives have you searching for specific chests and Recon tasks can even show you all remaining safe circles if you complete enough.



GUN RUNNER

5 For $6,000 you can call in a loadout from multiplayer, so design a few for different circumstances. Long-range works well in the early game, but you'll need close-quarters gear later.

GOING DOWN

6 Whether you're itching for a fight or looking to make yourself scarce, plan your arrival accordingly. In most cases, you should aim for a built-up area in the circle, but as far from the flight path as possible.

PERK UP

7 The perks you choose make a huge difference, so pick the right ones based on the stage of the match. Cold-Blooded and Ghost are great for lying low in the late game, but getting two primary weapons with Overkill is essential early on.

FULL METAL JACKET

8 Stock up on armour, but consider your enemy's protection, too. Each shot on a shielded foe shows the image of a shield on your HUD. Keep an ear out for the sound of an armour break, and continue your attack.

HOT WHEELS

9 If you're in a pinch and need to hightail it away to the safe zone, get yourself one of *Call of Duty: Warzone*'s five different vehicle types. Use the ATV for speed, but the cargo truck is best if you need to head through a hot zone.

CLEAN UP

10 It's helpful to know when you've eliminated a full enemy team so you can focus on looting. While you should always remain vigilant, when you've offed a target and the words 'team wipe' appear, you know you're in the clear. For now.

AROUND THE WORLD *Three hot zones for aggressive types to visit*

BACK TO IT

11 This a decent tip for almost every battle royale game: keep your back to the circle's edge as it moves in. Don't stop looking over your shoulder, but the majority of threats will be within the circle as the safe zone shrinks down.

GET EVEN

12 In trios, make sure you share with the rest of your team. If you've got too much armour or an enviable arsenal, redistribute a bit. It's important you each have at least $4,500 to buy teammates back from the afterlife.

DIARY

TOTAL PEACE

PART III

The definition of peace gets stretched to its limit as we continue our pacification of Ancient China.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

1. Cannot declare war
2. Cannot directly attack armies
3. Can defend from attack

It's all going wrong. I'm supposed to be spreading peace throughout Ancient China in *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, but it turns out that avoiding the *'Total War'* bit is rather difficult. Last time, my faction leader Cao Cao spent most of his time preparing for an inevitable attack by the enormously powerful Lady Wu, embarking on a series of what I like to call 'preventative conflicts'.

First, I goaded the Yellow Turban Rebel He Yi into attacking me, so I could defend myself by taking all his lands. I then vassalised the upstart warlord Yuan Shu after he attempted a surprise assault on my northern borders, a decision I was forced into when Lady Wu finally brought the hammer down on my western frontier. This proved to be a huge mistake, as two of my trading partners – Kong Rong and Wang Lang – declared war on Yuan Shu, forcing me either to defend him or declare his independence.

The current situation looks like this. My armies are engaged along my western and southern borders fighting lady Wu, while my eastern border is exposed to assault from both Kong Rong and Wang Lang. Only my northern border is secure, buffered by my vassal Yuan Shu and my two coalition partners, Yuan Shao and Liu Bei.

There's no way I can fight all three wars at once. Fortunately, I don't have to. While I'm still a long way from defeating Lady Wu, it seems taking her capital city and a large chunk of her territory has convinced her that peace might be in her best interests. We quickly patch together an armistice, at which point I withdraw from her lands and rush to my eastern border.

IT'S ALL KONG RONG

Even with all their forces combined, Kong Rong and Wang Lang are nowhere near as strong as Lady Wu. With all my armies disentangled from the larger conflict, it doesn't take much effort to subdue them. Indeed, it seems Kong Rong doesn't want to be in a war with me at all. After I smash one of his armies and seize his Confucian temple, I sue for peace, and afterwards our diplomatic relationship has barely taken a hit. With Kong Rong pacified, I then pour all my forces onto Wang Lang's head, besieging his main city and then capturing it when he attempts to break the siege.

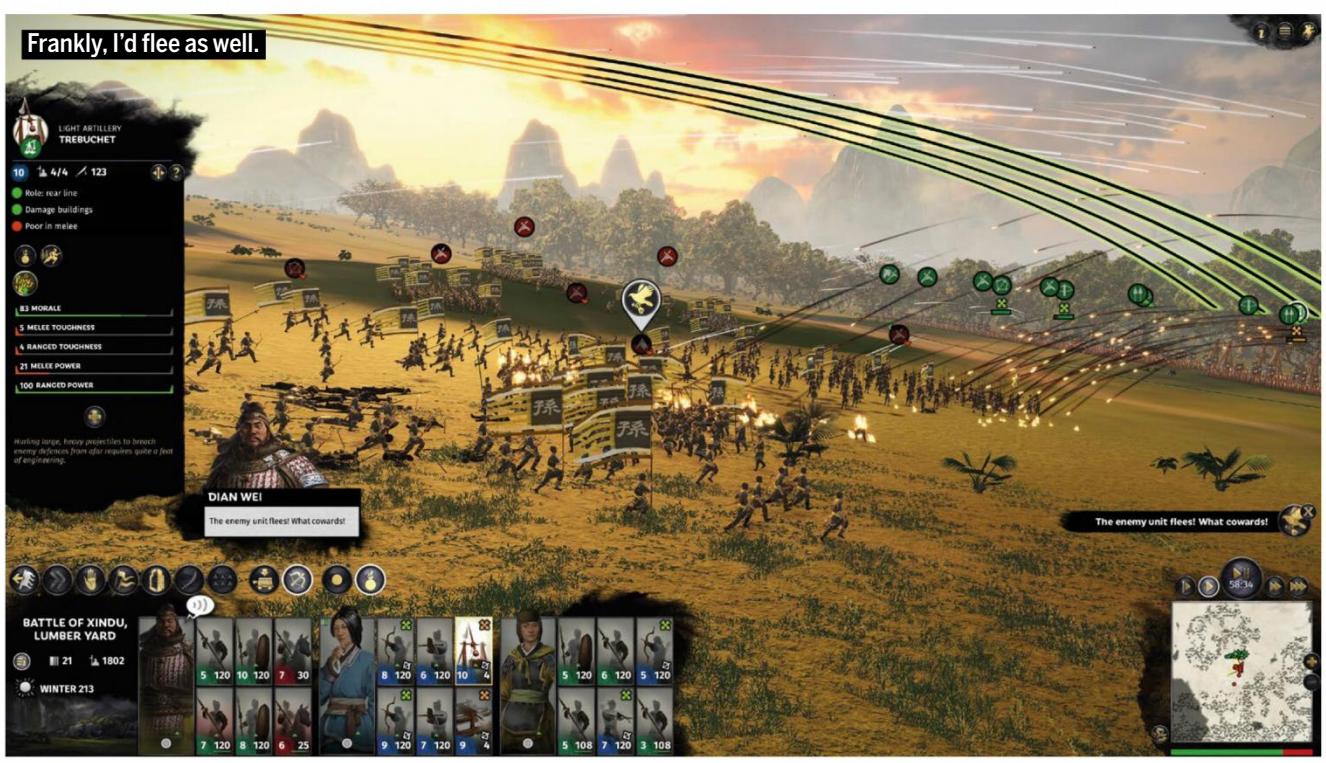
I'm all set to capture Lang's only other settlement, when Lady Wu decides that, actually, she hasn't had enough of war yet. Urgh. This is exactly what I feared would happen. I secure my eastern border as best I can by vassalising Wang Lang, then split my four armies into groups of two and send them west and south respectively.

Some good comes from dragging my armies across half of China, though. Taking Wang Lang's city officially elevates me to the rank of duke, which means my faction has an official title. The 'Duchy of Wei'. I'm slightly behind on the whole dukedom craze. My coalition partner Yuan Shao already made himself the Duchy of Song by seizing control of the puppet emperor from another warlord called Lu Bu (whose faction was destroyed in the process). I am slightly ahead of Lady Wu becoming the Duchy of Wu, however. As my armies march toward her borders, I hope this means I'm slightly ahead in all other areas too.

THE TOTAL WAR AI WILL GENERALLY RUN AWAY FROM ANY SUPERIOR FORCE

What follows is a years' long conflict involving many hard-fought battles, and one in which it's increasingly difficult to stick to my rule of not attacking enemy armies. The *Total War* AI will generally run away from any superior force, and it's very difficult to chase down an army that's marching away at full speed. This means I often need to let them take one of my settlements, then lay siege to it and hope they'll try to break it. I have particular trouble breaking down her armies to the south. Meanwhile, Cao Cao's own army gets snarled up in a mountain range up to the north, spending years trying to take a handful of small settlements so the northwest edge of our border stays secure.

Nonetheless, it's a war I'm winning. The Duchy of Wu's borders are slowly shrinking away, while my own are gradually expanding. Then, all of a sudden, I'm no longer at war with the Duchy of Wu, because Liu Bei, my closest ally throughout the entire game, jumps in and vassalises them.



It's a genuine shock. Liu Bei (now known as the Duchy of Shu-Han), has in one fell swoop made himself the most powerful person in China by far. He now de-facto controls around half of China, and his territory almost completely surrounds my own. I can't expand, and all my trade-routes are subject to his whims. I'm also very annoyed. That was my prize. I did all the hard work, and he just swept in and took the reward, like a hawk stealing a mouse off a crow.

I need to deal with this situation urgently, otherwise the Duchy of Shu-Han is on a runaway course to victory. But the only way I can meaningfully affect the situation is to declare war, and even though I've been bending the rules like a

THE BELLIGERENTS *In battle for control*

CAO CAO
Our faction head. Ruler of the newly minted Duchy of Wei

LIU BEI
Our closet coalition ally. Soon to become head of the Duchy of Shu-Han.

LADY WU
Our most dangerous enemy. Will become leader of the Duchy of Wu.

YUAN SHAO
Our other main coalition partner. First to elevate to dukedom.

LU BU
Warlord in control of the puppet emperor, which confers bonuses.

YUAN SHU
Our (reluctant) vassal on our northern border.

KONG RONG
Warlord to the east who focuses mainly on trading.

WANG LANG
Small-time warlord to the east.

LIU CONG
Small-time warlord to the north.

MA CHONG
Some guy who randomly declares war on us.

solicitous Uri Geller, I'm not allowed to do that. Besides, if I did opt for war, I doubt I'd stand much of a chance against Shu-Han in the field.

I look for some other solutions. Espionage is out, as I don't have a spy in Shu-Han's ranks. I do have one inside Lady Wu's ranks, but he isn't really in a position to take over the faction or anything. I could encourage the Duchy of Wu to declare their independence, but this means declaring war on Shu-Han anyway, so that's out too. I do have enough Credibility points to trigger a proxy war, but there's nobody nearby except for the Duchy of Song, and I can't get them to fight Shu-Han because we're all in a coalition together. Unless...

I gather the coalition together and call a vote. Who's up for kicking out the Duchy of Shu-Han? The Duchy of Song eagerly agrees, as does our other coalition member who I won't name because they're way off to the west and frankly we've got enough names to work with. It's settled. Shu-Han is officially out of the coalition. The moment this goes through, I press the Duchy of Song to declare war on Shu-Han, with the hope of buying myself some time so I can increase my own military strength.

I'm genuinely saddened by this turn of events. Liu Bei was my pal. He helped me exact my entirely peaceful revenge after a warlord named Tao Qian murdered my father. Little do I know that I've just lit the touch-paper to the mother of all gunpowder barrels.

The very next turn, everything goes to shit. It starts with my vassal Yuan Shu, who announces he doesn't want to be my vassal anymore and declares war. Also declaring war is Liu Cong, son of a long-time semi-ally I had called Liu Biao. On top of that, some guy called Ma Chong declares war on me for reasons I can't seem to comprehend. Then comes the real kicker. The Duchy of Shu-Han declares war, and with them, the vast expanse of the Duchy of Wu.

Now literally every inch of my border is seething red with war. As if that wasn't a big enough problem, this mass declaration of war has also severed half of my trade agreements, which instantly bankrupts me. To get back into the black, I have to disband one of my armies and raise taxes across all my territory. This causes a drop in public order that, under normal circumstances, would lead to rebellion. The way things are going, however, I'll be footnote in the history books long before that eventuality arises.

As Liu Cong and Yuan Shu deploy their forces, and another massive army belonging to the Duchy of Wu appears right on my southern borders, I reckon this might be it. But hell if I'm going to go down without a fight. I deploy my remaining armies as best I can, and hope the situation doesn't get any worse.

As it turns out, fortune hasn't entirely abandoned me. When Lady Wu's Army clashes with my own, the game announces that my spy inside the Duchy of Wu dynasty is leading a retinue of the army, and that I can extract him from the army and use his retinue as reinforcements. As a result, rather than this battle being potentially the pebble that starts the landslide, I crush Lady Wu's forces and buy myself a little breathing space.

Not all that much, though, unfortunately. Both Liu Cong and Yuan Shu's armies are already nibbling at my territory. I need to put an end to at least one of these wars now. I hit the diplomacy screen. Neither Liu Cong or Yuan Shu are willing to settle for peace. But miraculously, the Duchy of Shu-Han actually is. Admittedly, they want one of my cattle farms as reparations, but they'll also give me 5,000 gold in exchange.

Frankly, it's a far better deal than I could reasonably expect, and I eagerly agree. This puts an end to my wars with both Shu-Han and Wu, meaning I only need to deal

All those balletic sweeps won't save you from Xiahou Dun.

Your melee units eventually acquire the ability to throw caltrops.

with the far smaller forces of Liu Cong and Yuan Shu. As I turn all my forces toward these two enemies, I lose a Jade mine to Liu Cong, but Yuan Shu suffers an embarrassing defeat by one of my settlement garrisons despite having the superior force. Next, Cao Cao comes down from the northern mountains and shockingly wipes out my former vassal Yuan Shu. Liu Cong follows shortly after, perishing in the jade mine he took from me not three seasons prior.

LIU CONG FOLLOWS SHORTLY AFTER, PERISHING IN THE JADE MINE

PEACE IN PIECES

My re-seizure of the jade mine also sees Cao Cao elevated to the rank of King, at which point he declares himself Emperor of China. He isn't actually emperor yet, as both Lady Wu and Liu Bei also declare themselves empress and emperor at the same time. But now The Three Kingdoms of Three Kingdoms are officially in place.

But I think we've come far enough for me to tell you exactly what I think of peace. It sucks. Even if you can call the horribly manipulated bastard version of what I've done in this series peace, avoiding overt aggression in *Total War* is really, really hard. The new campaign features, such as advanced diplomacy, espionage, and trade do help you avoid directly attacking people to a certain extent, but they're far too curtailed in the early game for you to make much use of them.

The later game enables more powerful diplomatic options, such as confederating other states into your own empire, but if, like me, you ended up at war with seemingly everyone despite your best efforts, the other factions will hate you far too much to consider becoming part of your empire. Besides, the battles are just too much fun, particularly later on when you unlock more bespoke units and character abilities, at which point *Three Kingdoms*' battle mode reveals much more of its own personality.

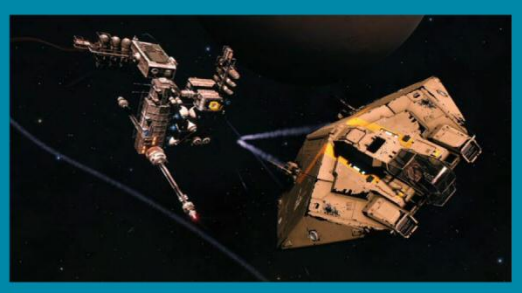
Frankly, you can take your peace and put it in the bin. From here on out, I'm all about war baby. ■

At least the scenery is nice.

I hate sieges.

ELITE DANGEROUS' HUTTON ORBITAL STATION

Visiting the space sim's most remote destination. ***By Andy Kelly***



LEFT: Just point your ship and go, you'll get to the Hutton Orbital eventually.

There are around 15,000 known starports in *Elite*'s impossibly vast galaxy, and likely tens of thousands more that players have yet to discover. But perhaps the most notorious of them all is Hutton Orbital, located in the Alpha Centauri system. It's an unremarkable backwater outpost, made infamous by the fact that it's almost 7 million light seconds from the system's hyperspace jump arrival point. This means that, even in supercruise, it can take over an hour of flying to reach it.

I remember my first encounter with Hutton Orbital in the earliest days of *Elite Dangerous*. I picked up a mission in a nearby system to ferry some cargo there, oblivious to the sheer distance I would have to cover to reach it. I jumped to Alpha Centauri, pointed my Sidewinder at the station, hit supercruise and wondered why, 15 minutes later, it was still a tiny blip on my radar. This is a trap many green pilots stumble into, to the point where it's almost like a hazing by developer Frontier.

But over time, Hutton Orbital's reputation has grown to the point where getting there is now a bizarre rite of passage, and people regularly fly there by *choice*. It's a boring, gruelling journey, but in an example of Frontier's tight relationship with the *Elite* community, there's now a rare commodity – a commemorative Hutton Orbital mug – that you can only buy if you make the deeply uninteresting trip there. And, of course, being a longtime *Elite* player, I had to try it myself.

TRUCK STOP

Being a *Euro Truck Simulator 2* veteran, I was ready for the challenge. Driving in one direction for long periods of time is actually *fun* to me, and in a spaceship I don't even have to worry about speed limits, traffic lights, or changing gears. Reaching Hutton Orbital isn't particularly challenging. You just point your ship at the station, engage the throttle, and occasionally adjust your heading. It's more a test of patience than skill.

That's not to say the trip is completely free of danger. If you play *Elite* in open mode, where it's possible to run into other humans, there's always a chance some jerk will be camped out at Hutton Orbital, waiting to blast hapless pilgrims to space dust before they can dock and get their hands on that precious mug. And there have been cases of players in smaller ships running out of fuel mid-journey – although that wasn't a problem for me in my Asp, a ship with a deep tank of gas.

Starting at Alpha Centauri's jump point, Hutton Orbital is 6,784,404 light seconds away. A couple of thousand light seconds feels like a lot to me when I'm running trade routes in *Elite*, so the distance is immediately daunting. Twenty minutes into the journey and Eden, the planet the station orbits, is still a tiny speck in the distance. Usually in supercruise you can see dozens of other ships buzzing around you, but out there it's just you and the endless void. It's actually quite peaceful.

FAR OUT

Forty minutes in and you start questioning why you're even doing this in the first place. Chances are your ship has remained perfectly stable, meaning you haven't even had to touch the controls. I filled in the time by listening to podcasts, which made me feel like I was on some kind of intergalactic commuter train. Then, eventually, Eden suddenly feels much bigger, and you can see the glint of Hutton Orbital suspended above it. You can also see the reassuring glow of the nearby star, Proxima Centauri.

As you begin to slow down, which you do *way* before you actually reach the station, you have to adjust the position of your ship a little more, which shakes you out of your fugue. When I finally stopped a few metres away from the station, I'd been flying through space for an uninterrupted 1 hour and 33 minutes. I was genuinely thrilled to see this dump floating in front of me, and was surprised to find the paintwork on the front of my ship flaking off – a result of being in supercruise for so long.

I left the scuffs on my ship, wearing them like a badge of honour. Luckily no other players were waiting for me, and I was able to safely grab the fabled Hutton Mug. Because reaching the station involves little more than gas and fortitude, I didn't feel like I'd *achieved* anything. But it was a satisfying thing to strike off my virtual bucket list. Mostly I just love that something entirely player-led like this exists in *Elite*, and that Frontier responded by making it a recognised part of the universe. ■

STATION MASTER

Hutton Orbital's vital statistics

Station type: Orbital
Orbital period: 0.3 days
Faction: Hutton Orbital Truckers Cooperative
Government: Cooperative
Allegiance: Independent
State: Investment, Civil Liberty
Facilities: Docking, Refuel, Repair, Tuning, Black Market
Economy: Extraction
Imports: Bioreducing Lichen, H.E. Suits, Mineral Extractors
Prohibited: Narcotics, Slaves, Toxic Waste
Rare commodities: Hutton Mug, Centauri Mega Gin

I LEFT THE SCUFFS ON MY SHIP, WEARING THEM LIKE A BADGE OF HONOUR

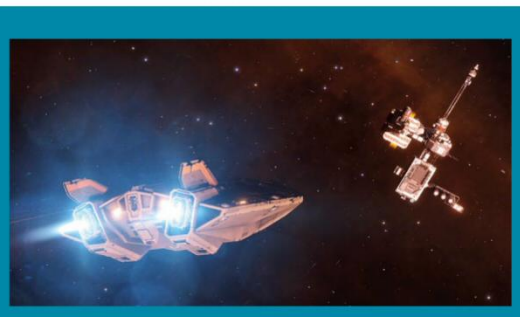
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
Apr 2, 2015

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

OUR REVIEW
86%

LINK
elitedangerous.com



RIGHT: You try holding this stoic face for 6,784,404 light seconds.

Mitzi and Susan fight and cry and laugh and unravel as one

Try and make this in *Animal Crossing*.

THE CAT LADY

A game about the tension between despair and hope. *By James Davenport*

One of the best adventure games I've ever played kind of quits being an adventure game an hour or so in, and starts to blossom into a bizarre hybrid. It's a narrative game of two halves: one the story of a beautiful friendship between Susan, a depressed loner whose only prior company were the stray cats she summoned with sad-ass piano tunes, and Mitzi, a young homeless woman and terminal cancer patient. The other, a supernatural tale of eldritch horror and, above all, gory revenge against twisted, evil men.

As you can probably already tell, *The Cat Lady* sets all phasers to melancholy from the first minute, pairing up two of the most hopeless and unfortunate souls in order to show us that as long as we're still kicking, there's still time to love, baby. Because between pushing Susan through horrific scenes of violence and excess – we'll get to all of that later – she'll just hang out and chat with her bud. It truly is one of the better depictions of friendship in games. Mitzi breaks down Susan's guard with persistence and a keen ear, and by moving into Susan's flat against her will. Hey, that's what friends are for, right?

They chat to each other about things completely unrelated to their cosmic dilemma, finding common ground in their pasts, interests, and trauma. It's a sweet, tender thing to see unfold, and rare in videogames, where friendship is so often treated with the dynamism of two stones brushing up against one another. Mitzi and Susan fight and cry and laugh and unravel as one. They move and change and grow together. It's the real deal, the sense of gravity in a game designed to unnerve and disorient at every other opportunity.

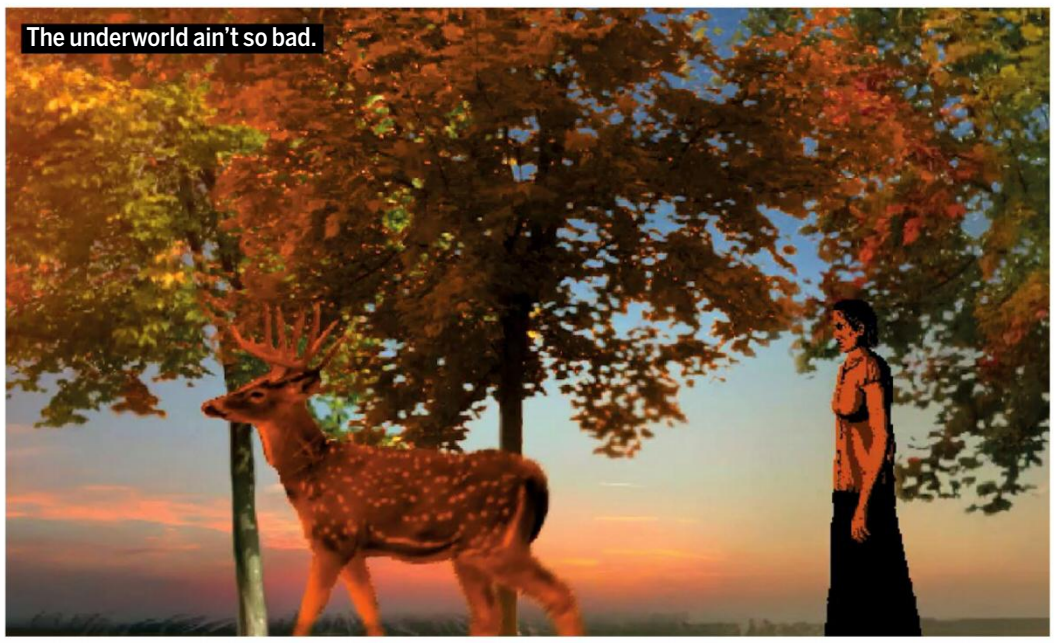
PAWS FOR THOUGHT

All that gossip and teasing and confessional time with Mitzi is necessary downtime. As I teased earlier, you'll spend the other half of *The Cat Lady* playing as an immortal demigod whose only remaining purpose is to seek out irredeemably monstrous people and kill them in the most gruesome, thematically vindictive ways you can imagine.

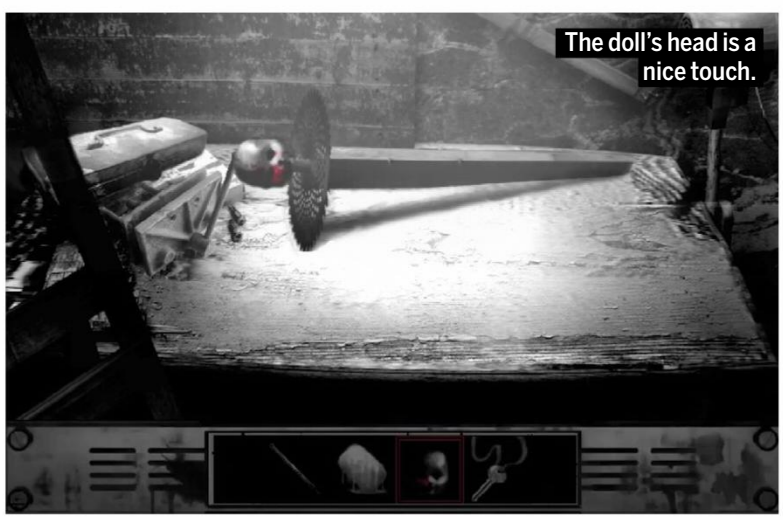
But it takes a rough turn of events to get there. And yeah, quick content warning: this is not a game for the light of heart or anyone that wants to avoid triggering their own trauma. Suicide, depression, and abuse are central themes in *The Cat Lady*, and

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED December 1, 2012	**DEVELOPER** Harvester Games
PUBLISHER Screen 7	**LINK** bit.ly/2wmraLP


The underworld ain't so bad.

Probably not paint.


The doll's head is a nice touch.

unabashedly explored. They're thrown at the wall and kicked around on the floor. If all the worst things about modern life coalesced like gasoline at the top of a mud puddle, *The Cat Lady* dances in it.

See, Susan reaches the height of despair in the opening moments of the game. She makes the awful decision to end her own life, fuelled by a pile of traumatic experiences with family, men, and strangers. It's easy to see why she becomes such a misanthrope, so distrusting of everyone but herself and stray cats. But she's given something like a second chance, and wakes up in a dirty, stinky field (an afterlife I can believe in) where she's instructed by an eldritch horror with an extremely cool name, The Queen of Maggots, to return to the world of the living and brutally murder five psychopaths she lovingly refers to as parasites.

From there on the game basically becomes an inverse Se7en, where you already know 'what's in the box' and hunt down the crew of monstrous serial killers that put it there. And these killers get off by preying on innocents in some pretty unashamedly grotesque ways.

One, a male doctor, tortures women, disassembles them, and recreates classic paintings with their body parts. It's objectification taken literally, the patriarchal idealism of toxic masculinity run through a French brutalism filter (see Martyrs, Inside) and propped up for Susan to utterly demolish with her newfound supernatural power. As the details of her past trickle in, so does the catharsis from giving each parasite what they deserve. It's constant whiplash: the slow tour through a parasite's nightmare home, their messed up ethos splattered all over the walls, sometimes literally, and Susan's violent victory lap, an unkillable messenger from alt-hell.

It's all accompanied by surreal, layered art that mixes a paper doll aesthetic with photography for a truly unique look. It begins with the blue and orange skies zooming by in the backdrop of a grey, monochrome hospital scene. There's the small detour to the Crow's dimension, another ancient eldritch entity that manifests here as a massive, darting eyeball against a dimly lit theatre. To

MYTH BUDSTERS

Meet the deities of* The Cat Lady*'s weird underworld

QUEEN OF MAGGOTS
Power over life and death, log cabin in underworld.

THE CROW
A massive eyeball and the master of riddles.

THE CATS
Not exactly what they seem – they're incarnations of spirits.

YOU'LL USE DANGEROUS CHEMICALS TO ASPHYXIATE EVEN MORE DANGEROUS MEN

leave, you only have to solve a riddle about which of the Crow's bear-sized, fish-eyed dolls is telling the truth. It's like one of *Monkey Island*'s wordplay puzzles, except all the jokes have been gutted and replaced with the feeling that something is very, very oh god so very wrong. Every scene is its own uneasy trip, a multimedia collage of colour and texture comprised of familiar images and materials that never quite sits right, even when *The Cat Lady* is at its most domestic. This is a grimy, serene world punctuated in equal parts by absolute stillness and graphic violence.

The puzzles shift from traditional item-hunting, trial-and-error tests to more of an interactive walking sim, where you occasionally set up Home-Alone-esque death traps for each of the themed murderers, ensuring they die writhing around in a pool of dramatic irony. As you play as Susan, you'll cobble together a mace from a doll's head and a buzzsaw, you'll use dangerous chemicals to asphyxiate even more dangerous men, you'll shotgun a man in a dreamlike home invasion, you'll don a gasmask and go on a full blown rampage. It's therapy, if therapy was about killing demented, greasy depictions of your demons.

And even though you're going up against a crew of unfeeling butchers, there's no fail state or genuine threat to Susan – if she dies, she's resurrected immediately, thanks to her sort-of divine benefactor – so *The Cat Lady* is a great fit for those horror fans that don't like the high anxiety that comes with running from monsters in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* or *Resident Evil 2*.

IM-PURR-FECT

But it hasn't aged perfectly. Parts of the soundtrack are laughably bad in the cold light of 2020 – that trashy fuzz emo rock you normally find in a *Devil May Cry* game doesn't quite find a home in a game that asks to be taken seriously. As I replay the game, I find that kind of aged cheese endearing, but many will find it appalling. And the greater mythos doesn't always line up with the mental health themes or make much internal sense at all. For a fuller and more fleshed out take on it, you'll need to play the game's sequels *Downfall* and *Lorelai*. They each feature characters from *The Cat Lady* and really dig into what those eldritch bums the Queen of Maggots and the Crow, and some new freaky friends, are all about. There just isn't any videogame trilogy quite like this: dark, strange, and a little rough around the edges, but above all earnest and beautiful.

The Cat Lady is simultaneously goofy and sentimental, an exercise in justice and comic violence that doesn't always seem to match up with the dead serious subject matter. But it's a game ultimately about persistence against the pain of existing, and the fleeting bits of comfort and catharsis we find in our connections to one another, or the even smaller bits buried in the microscopic nodules of hope we're able to conjure up in our darkest moments. And if those nodules take the form of graphic revenge fantasies against genuinely, irredeemably evil people, I'll take 'em. ■

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Joanna Nelius

JOANNA NELIUS

If it's dark and scary, I want to play it. I don't care if the game might make me scream in the moment. Horror has never given me nightmares, anyway.

SOMA

somagame.com

→ The horror is layered like really thick coats of paint. You're confined to small underwater spaces, stalked by monsters, all while trying to figure out if what you're seeing is real or just part of the experimental treatments your doctor is doing for your brain trauma. There's something to scare everyone in *Soma*.

OUTLAST

redbarrelsgames.com

→ Dead bodies hanging from ceilings. Human experiments. A self-anointed 'priest'. Disfigured patients hunting you through the halls. You thought you wanted the job of investigating that psychiatric hospital run by the Murkoff Corporation. But after this, you won't want to be a journalist anymore.

INSIDE

playdead.com

→ A dystopian world run by government officials who kidnap people to brainwash them leads to one of the most unexpected endings I've ever seen in a videogame. The story is told entirely through visuals, no dialogue, and the puzzles capitalise on every act of desperation. A lovely mindtrip.

MASOCHISIA

goo.gl/KI7yLK

→ How do you describe the feeling of playing a character as they gradually become a psychopath? Unlike most of the other the other games on this little list that happily cross the line into 'too outrageous to be real', this one will take your humanity, light it on fire, and laugh manically as it turns to ash and cinders. Horrific!

AMONG THE SLEEP

krillbite.com

→ You are a toddler, your mother is missing, and the world is a scarier, more confusing place without her. There's no grotesque imagery here, because that's too terrifying for a child, but everything is exaggerated like a nightmare. Thank goodness for your teddy bear, though, who literally lights the way.

DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB

ddlc.moe

→ This isn't your average dating sim. Actually, it's not a dating sim. It's a horror game without the usual tropes, making every descent into chaos a genuine surprise – a lesson in controlling your fear when you lose control of the situation. Oh, and one important tip – you need to keep an eye on your game files.

ALIEN: ISOLATION

bit.ly/2HY2aNd

→ The first time I played this game, I started panicking when it showed me how to hide in the lockers. I hid in one and didn't come out for five minutes until I realised I wasn't far enough into the game to run into any bloodthirsty aliens. But eventually the HR Giger nightmare appeared so I hid in some more hiding places. Then it ate me.

DEAD SPACE 2

ea.com

→ *Dead Space 2* doesn't ease you into the horror like similar games. Oh no, there's no meandering opening. You're running from spiny limbed aliens tearing the flesh off people and ripping out their organs just a few minutes into it. You have to escape unscathed. And you're in a straight jacket. Good luck, dude.

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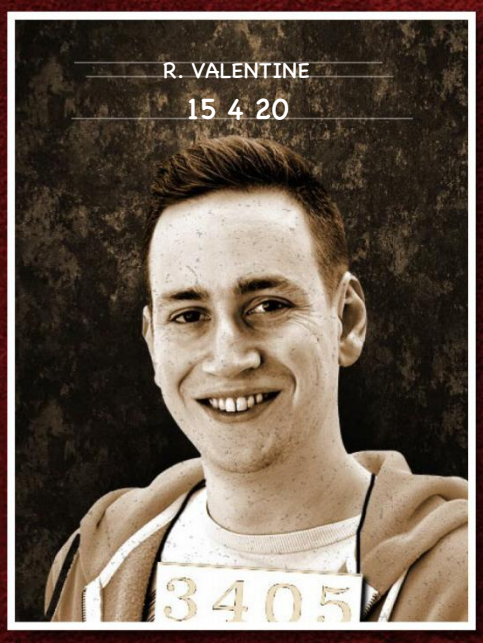
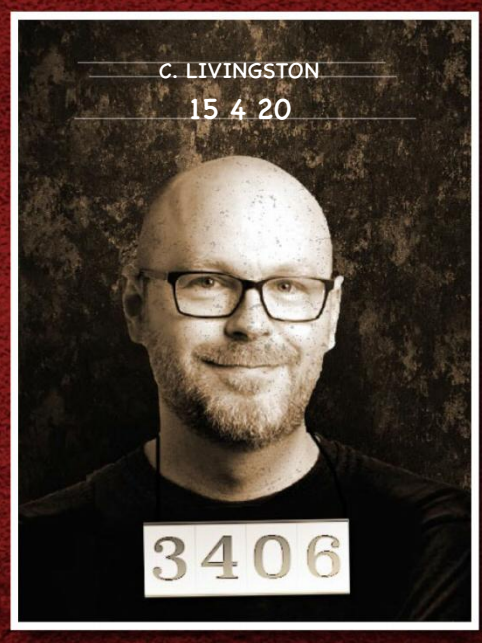


"ROBBIN'" ROBIN VALENTINE

Crimes: Hasn't cleaned his PC or his desktop for two years running.

ANDY "CASHBACK" KELLY

Crimes: Refunds games on Steam without really giving them a fair chance.



CHRIS "TEN TIMES" LIVINGSTON

Crimes: Wanted for excessive save-scumming until he gets what he's after.

MEET THE FAMILY

You might think the PC Gamer team is pretty squeaky clean. You'd be wrong. We're hoodlums and wise guys to a man, with rap sheets long enough to fill a terabyte drive.

RACHEL "ONE HUNDRED" WATTS

Crimes: Talks about Nintendo games in the office. Like, a lot.

"NOBLE" PHIL SAVAGE

Crimes: Reads his Slack messages outside of work hours.

TYLER "HOG" WILDE

Crimes: Clears the dust out of his computer with a leaf blower.

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